

"FRESH AND PROVOCATIVE"

— MATT DIXON, CO-AUTHOR OF *THE CHALLENGER SALE*

GAP

like a benign tumor that poses no threat to one's health. If you want buyers to agree to purchase your solutions *now*, you must open their eyes to the malignancy. That is, you have to reveal the damage the problems are causing them *today* and the gray area of *tomorrow*. They will follow if

SELLING

GETTING THE CUSTOMER TO YES:

**HOW PROBLEM-CENTRIC SELLING INCREASES SALES BY
CHANGING EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS,
OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS, CLOSING AND PRICE.**

KEENAN

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To Sales People Everywhere

Hey, salespeople, you guys rock! You are the extreme athletes of the business world. You only get paid if you deliver. You put anywhere from 40% to 100% of your salary on the line in commissions. There are no guarantees, and you shrug off the idea there should be. You suffer rejection and get pummeled with No's at the hands of rude, terse, and overwhelmed buyers. You spend weeks, months, and years working a deal only to lose it to the competition over a few dollars or an insignificant feature. You're constantly shadowed by overzealous managers pounding you about quota and the next deal. The life of a salesperson is tough, and yet you come back every day, ready to grind it out, looking to make your buyers' and customers' lives better.

It's because of my love for you that I created **Gap Selling** and wrote this book. **Gap Selling** is about making your life easier. It's about helping you understand that selling isn't as hard as we've been led to believe. Selling shouldn't be fraught with countless lost deals, fruitless price negotiations, prospects going dark, people ignoring your emails, and unpredictable sales pipelines. It's only like that when you're doing it wrong. When you're doing it right, selling is fluid, predictable, and efficient. This book is about helping you get there.

Gap Selling is going to take you on a ride, and for some of you it will be an uncomfortable one. It's going to challenge many of your entrenched beliefs and approaches to selling. It's in direct conflict with what we've been taught to believe for years, like:

- Relationships really don't matter
- People really do buy from people they don't like
- There is no such thing as "closing"
- You should never defend your product or price
- No one gives a shit about you or your product and service
- Pitching is not selling
- Selling to a customer's need is wrong
- and more

Almost all of the issues and challenges within sales are self-induced. We create the reasons the customer goes dark. We create the focus on price. We allow the customer to hold us hostage over an irrelevant

feature. We allow the competition to swoop in at the eleventh hour. We create the situations where the buyer chooses to do nothing. We make it easy for prospects to ignore our emails, voicemails, and LinkedIn messages. These failings are almost always our fault because we haven't been taught the game of sales. We know the rules, we know the objective, but most of us don't understand the nuances of the game and it's costing us and the sales industry billions of dollars a year.

Gap Selling is going to teach you what the game of selling is all about and how to win. It's going to give you the practical advice and executable skills and methods to win more deals, shorten sales cycles, and avoid losing on price. It's going to show you how to get buyers to partner with you and be an integral part of the sale so they no longer go dark, avoid your calls, and put up unnecessary roadblocks.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I is devoted to teaching you the rules of gap selling so you can approach every sale with the right mental framework and psychological insight. Part II will teach you the specific skills and strategies you need to play this game better than everyone else, from the steps of a killer discovery, to conducting a kickass demo, to avoiding pitfalls and diffusing objections. Part III will reveal the surprising ways gap-selling principles can be used to generate more productive prospecting so you can build a bigger, better pipeline faster. And finally, Part IV serves as a guide for sales leaders to build and manage a gap-selling environment, assemble a killer gap-selling team, and never lose another night's sleep worrying about making their numbers.

We've been playing the game too long without understanding the game we've been playing. You deserve better.

Are you ready to learn the game of sales? Good! Now, consider this the last day to sell the way you're selling. There is a better way.

PART I

KNOW THE GAME

Are you ready to learn the secret to the game?

CHAPTER ONE

WELCOME TO THE GAME

It was 0-0. Our opponents were on our 10-yard line. We had stopped them seven plays in a row. It was impressive. We must have had a penalty or something, because as I recall they hadn't gotten a first down. But now it was 4th and goal late in the fourth quarter. All we had to do was hold them for one more play.

The year was 1979, and I was eleven years old. I had never played competitive football before and this was my first season. I didn't watch it on TV. My mom and dad were '60s hippies, not sport enthusiasts, and certainly not football fans. So, my knowledge of the game was pretty much zero.

I was skinny but fast so the coaches figured I'd make a great running back. They pulled another kid and me aside and showed us a chalkboard with circles and numbers scrawled all over it. These represented the offensive line and the "holes" between each lineman. It might as well have been in Chinese. I honestly can't remember if I didn't have much desire to learn or if I found the whole thing too complicated, but the outcome was the same: I didn't pay attention.

In our first scrimmage, the coach put me in at running back. We huddled up and the QB called the play. I had learned enough to understand that the quarterback's play determined who got the ball and who didn't, but nothing else made any sense to me. So, once the huddle broke, I asked the other running back, "Who gets the ball?"

"You do," he said, giving me a weird look.

Ok. Got it.

When the ball was snapped, I took the handoff and ran. I was tackled within half a second in the backfield for a loss. As I got up, the entire team, including the coach, started yelling at me.

What are you doing, Keenan? Where the hell were you going? The hole is over there! What the hell, Keenan?

I had no idea what they were talking about.

Apparently, what the QB says in the huddle matters. I didn't go to the appropriate hole. I didn't understand the play that was being called. I didn't understand the plays at all. As you can imagine, that single play was the end of my running back days, at least for that year.

I was benched for the rest of the scrimmage. Embarrassed, confused, and frustrated, I swore I would do better next time, if next time ever came.

The next day at practice, the coach put me on defense in the safety position, and he said something I'll never forget: "Keenan, just run as

fast as you can and tackle the guy with the ball.”

I don't know if this coach was the best coach in the world, or if he thought I was the dumbest kid in the world. Regardless, he understood that despite being a talented athlete, I was struggling to understand the game. So, he made the game as simple as possible for me.

“Run as fast as you can and tackle the guy with the ball.”

That I could do. From then on, I flew around that football field like a Tasmanian devil, tackling whomever dared run the football against our team. It was my job. I loved it, and I was great at it.

Until the day it was 4th and goal, and the quarterback for the opposing team was about to snap the ball.

I was playing safety on the right side of the field, eyeing the quarterback, when he snapped the ball. I watched to see which running back he was going to hand it off to, when all of a sudden everyone started yelling, “Pass!”

Pass? Huh? No one passed in Pop Warner. Not back then, anyway. We were 11-and- 12-year-olds, for God's sake.

The quarterback dropped back to pass and I looked up and saw the wide receiver camped just five feet in front of me to my right. The quarterback turned our way and heaved the ball. It was a sorry excuse for a pass, a wobbling duck oscillating from side to side. I was standing right under it, as was the wide receiver. My heart began to pound. I was in the perfect position. I knew I could make this play and make it big. I'd timed the whole thing out. I envisioned everyone cheering me after the play ended. A calm came over me as I stepped back two steps, sized up the wide receiver, looked up at the ball, waited for him to catch it and timed my hit perfectly. The second he caught the ball, I lunged with all my weight and strength and tackled him to the ground. I jumped up, psyched about the punishment I had just put on this poor kid. However, as I got up, I realized I was the only one on my team celebrating. The other team, however, was going wild.

What happened? I had done what the coach told me to do, and yet we had lost, and judging by the dirty looks I was getting from my team, it was all my fault. I didn't understand. I had tackled the guy with the ball. No, I had *pummeled* the guy with the ball. I knew I had done my job.

It's what I didn't know that had cost us the game because I didn't know that my job was to make sure he never caught the ball in the first place.

Not only had I had never played football before, I hadn't bothered to learn anything about the game, either, and it all came out in that play. The first thing I didn't understand was the concept of turnovers. We had practiced fumbles, but since no one ever passed we didn't

cover interceptions, and my knowledge of football was limited to whatever I had seen on that practice field. I also didn't understand the value of ball possession. I simply saw being on defense and therefore on the field as a chance to play. It never entered my mind that having the ball or being on offense was how you kept your opponent from getting a chance to score and win the game. But my fatal misunderstanding was what constituted a touchdown. For whatever reason, at eleven years old, I was under the impression that you had to pass the goal posts to score. The goal posts were my touchdown indicators; therefore, I saw no problem with waiting to tackle the other team's wide receiver until after he had caught the ball five yards before the goal posts—smack in the middle of the end zone.

We didn't lose because I wasn't a good athlete. We didn't lose because I was unable to tackle the receiver. We didn't lose because I wasn't able to intercept the ball. We lost because I didn't understand the game. My lack of football acumen meant I couldn't execute properly, and it cost my team a win they deserved.

It's Not That You Can't Sell—It's That You Can't Diagnose

I didn't lose the game because I couldn't tackle. I lost the game because I didn't understand the concept of turnovers, particularly an interception. You aren't losing sales because you can't sell. You're losing them because you don't understand how to diagnose your customer problem(s) and how the problem(s) drive the sale. Your product doesn't drive the sale. The problem does, and if you can't diagnose the problem, no sales skill or any other sales training is going to help you. When you reach out to get just "15 minutes" of your buyer's time, it's not going to happen if your buyer doesn't have a problem you can solve. That's why you get no answer to 99% of your cold emails. They don't highlight a problem that resonates with the buyer. It's why you're losing 80% or more of your deals. The buyer has determined the problem isn't worth solving after all. You get beat up on price because solving the problem isn't worth what you're asking. You see, the problem drives the sale. Being a great salesperson means being able to diagnose the customer's problem and understanding the impact the problem is having on their business.

Gap selling is going to make you a badass at diagnosing and then it's going to change the way you sell after identifying the problem. You're going to understand the game far better than you ever have, so you can stop being the reason you're losing deals.

Learning the Rules

I was a great athlete, maybe even an exceptional one, but that wasn't enough. Unfortunately, even after that experience, as much as I loved

football, I still didn't commit to mastering the nuances of the game. That knowledge deficit kept me from ever reaching my full potential as a player. Instead, I took all that inborn optimism and confidence and all my crazy energy and put it into mastering the nuances of the sales game.

It made sense. Growing up, I was the kid setting up the lemonade stands—the Tom Sawyer of my neighborhood who could always convince the other kids to join me in the game or adventure of my choice. As I got older, I became known as the guy with mad influencer skills who could figure out the solution to any problem or obstacle—at the time, mostly embodied by club bouncers and bartenders—and I had an awesome time doing it. Going into sales was a natural move.

I started my formal sales career slinging chamber memberships for the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce in 1996. Though I came in with zero formal experience, within a year I had beaten every sales record they had. From there, I jumped into Information Technology sales, getting hired despite admitting in my job interview that I had never even heard of Y2K. Four years and two jobs later, I was a VP managing \$300 million in revenue and running a nationwide 120-person sales team. Then in 2009, I started blogging. Every day, I wrote about running sales teams, managing sales teams, addressing poor sales strategies, putting in processes—all the things I was doing in my current job. Within two years, I was getting consulting offers and amassing tens of thousands of followers. I launched my company, [A Sales Guy](#), in March 2011. Since then, I've traveled around the world helping B2B marketers and sales leaders navigate the turbulent, constantly evolving, information-saturated sales landscape. It's been a blast!

Yet, as time marches on I've grown increasingly frustrated with the state of the selling union. The fundamentals of selling have not changed (and never will), but in recent years, as sales organizations have increasingly transitioned from field sales to inside sales and from outbound to inbound, salespeople are struggling to set appointments and win deals. Buyers are far more educated and resistant to the traditional selling methods salespeople use to drive sales. According to *CSO Insights World Class Sales Practices Report*, only 53% of salespeople in 2016 attained quota, down from 63% in 2012.ⁱ

What's going on? Part of the problem is that salespeople have become overly reliant on selling tools. They are also victims of unrealistic sales quotas, poor sales management, and the absence of a formal sales process. But even when the issue isn't organizational, I find salespeople sabotaging themselves. They don't see it that way, of course. Losing a deal is somehow always someone else's fault. For example:

- The prospect went dark.
- There was competition we didn't know about.
- Our price was too high.
- The deal didn't close when it was supposed to.
- After eight months, the prospect made no decision and kept to the status quo.
- No one returned my calls.
- I couldn't get access to the decision makers.
- The prospect kept leading me on but wouldn't commit.
- We didn't have all the features the buyer needed.
- They told us we won the deal, but then changed their mind.
- I have a crappy territory.
- The leads are bad.
- The competition has advantages I don't.

I've heard them all. But these are not reasons for losing a sale. They are excuses.

Yes, this list represents real issues that can at times undermine the sale, but ultimately the real reason why they get the best of salespeople is this: Too many salespeople suck at selling.

I know that's blunt, but sometimes the truth hurts. Anyone who regularly misses quota sucks at sales, plain and simple. Listen to me closely now, though: The reason why so many people suck is not for lack of natural selling skills or potential, but for the same reason that I let that wide receiver score a touchdown—they haven't learned the game. In a world that runs on providing value, their ignorance is limiting their ability to drive the sale.

I couldn't be bothered to learn all the rules of football but I know the rules of selling to the core. Following that set of rules is why I always hit my numbers when I was on a selling team, and why my clients hit their numbers once I teach it to them. I teach it to them. I know why the rules exist. Too many salespeople are losing deals because they don't. Not only that, *they don't even know that they don't know!* They can't see that they themselves are creating the situations that allow a buyer to go dark. They're the ones pushing their prospect

to go with the competition. They're allowing the buyer to walk away on price. They're emboldening prospects to demand features not currently available. In the same way that I stepped back and let that kid catch the ball in the end zone, salespeople are pushing buyers to walk away from a sale, and it's costing them and their companies millions. Salespeople are their own worst enemies. They have lost sight of what selling is really all about. But as in football, or anything in life, the deeper you understand the rules, the better you can maximize your opportunities to win.

I wrote *Gap Selling* to clarify the rules of selling and show salespeople and sales organizations how to sell more by teaching them how to better help their customers. See, at the heart of every sale, there's a gap. It's a gap between what buyers have now and what they believe they want in the future, between who they are now and who they want to be tomorrow, or even where they are now and where they want to go. This gap represents the value of the sale to the buyer *and* the salesperson. Without it, there is no sale.

The Secret to No More Sucking!

Gap Selling will teach you everything you need to know about the gap and why it matters. It will also teach you how to leverage the gap that exists in every opportunity and maximize the value of the solutions you have to offer, whether it's by increasing your buyers' customer base, augmenting their revenue, streamlining their processes, or making their life or work more productive and enjoyable. By the time you're done with this book, you'll understand how properly assessing the gap drives the entire sales process, from negotiating price to overcoming objections, from addressing blockers to handling the competition, from preventing leads from going dark to the close. You'll learn how to:

- **“Read” prospects’ minds during discovery**—so you can learn their concerns and spotlight possible objections ahead of time, and avoid getting blindsided by their decisions.
- **Identify and even anticipate buyers’ unique needs and problems**—so you can provide customized solutions and provide unparalleled value
- **Influence the change process**—so buyers can see why they should want you to help them.
- **Maximize your value as a resource**—so you're not perceived as just a salesperson, but as a consultant and

industry thought leader.

- **Better service your customers and put their needs first**—so they insist you come along on their buying journey.
- **Create a sense of urgency**—so you can shorten sales cycles.
- **Improve close rates**—so you can stop wasting time on deals that aren't going to happen.
- **Prevent unnecessary complications**—so you can control the sale and not let it (or the customer) control you.
- **Improve predictability**—so you never have to scramble at the last minute to make quota.

Every selling challenge we salespeople face can be traced to the gap; every solution stems from identifying it, properly assessing its value, and selling to it (which, as you'll see, is totally different from selling a product or service). Whether you're selling software, consulting services, or smartphones, the insights and techniques revealed in Gap Selling are applicable to any type of sales or transaction.

Quit Just Selling; Sell Better

I didn't go into sales because I love selling. I did it because I love helping people and solving problems. I love fixing shit. That's what gap selling is all about. It's not about pitching products and services; it's about solving problems and making people's lives easier. I haven't met anyone who hasn't been astonished at the difference gap selling makes in their close rates. As with anything, once you know what you need to know, everything falls into place. I learned a lot after that first disastrous football game, and even went on to have a few interceptions. The first one sent the coach into a tizzy, he was so excited and happy for me. That day, he told me, I had made up for the mistake that cost us the game a few weeks earlier. I was as proud as I could be, and went on to enjoy playing football for years. Yet, I can still see the stupid ball wobbling in the sky just over my head. I can still remember taking those fateful few steps back to allow that kid to catch the ball before I tackled him a split second later. I still remember the immediate jubilation I felt thinking I had done my job, and the immediate shock and horror that followed as I learned that I had cost us the game because of what I didn't know.

Losing a deal sucks. It affects your morale, your quota, your bank account—everything! But losing a deal you shouldn't have lost, a deal you had the talent, skills, and capabilities to close but didn't because you didn't understand the sale? That is the worst. Read this book and you'll never again lose a deal you shouldn't.

You're not losing deals today because you don't work hard, or don't care, or you're dumb. No, you're losing deals because you don't know what you don't know. You don't understand the rules of the selling game. Many of you are still selling, and if you're selling while you're selling, you're not selling. You're working with an outdated concept of what selling is all about. You're missing out on important sales principles and techniques that can provide you with so much insight into your customers and what they need that you'll be half-way to securing the deal before you do the demo. There's a hole in your sales education; a set of important concepts you've never been taught. *Gap Selling* will fix that, making sure that when it comes to the game of sales, you don't just know better; you know it all.

CHAPTER TWO

the NINE truthbombs of selling

You're sitting at your desk going through your pipeline, rubbing your temple. Damn, your head hurts! Just as you're thinking about running to the convenience store to buy some ibuprofen, a wildly energetic, friendly guy wearing a red plaid shirt magically shows up at your office door. It's me, Keenan. Hey, whassup! I hold out a small black box. Lying there on the black felt is a small, FDA-approved white pill guaranteed to make your headache disappear in one dose.

How much would you pay for my pill?

Fifty cents? \$1.50? \$5.00?

How about a million dollars? Would you pay that?

You roll your eyes. A million dollars to make a headache go away? Yeah, whatever.

Then I start asking you questions:

Does this headache come on frequently? Does it affect your vision? How's your balance? Do your limbs ever feel weak? Have you felt nauseated recently? Have you ever experienced numbness or spasms in your face?

Your answer is yes. To all of it. An immediate visit to your doctor, who orders an MRI scan, confirms the worst: You have a brain tumor.

Does a million bucks still sound like too much for my pill?

Yeah, I didn't think so.

The hypothetical scenario above might seem a little corny, but it serves an important purpose: It reveals how the nine truths of selling play out in every sales transaction you'll ever engage in. They are:

1. No problem, no sale
2. In every sale there's a gap
3. All sales are about change
4. Customers don't like change
5. Sales are emotional
6. Customers do like change when they feel it's worth the cost
7. Asking "Why?" gets customers to "Yes"
8. Sales happen when the future state is a better state
9. No one gives a shit about you

Let's explore each rule in depth so you can see how they play out in the real world.

Truth # 1: No Problem, No Sale

Every sale starts with a problem. If a problem doesn't exist, there is no sale—period. It's that simple. Every sale is initiated with someone being unhappy, frustrated, angry, sad, irritated, or some other emotion about a problem that is negatively affecting them. This frustration with the problem acts as the catalyst for change. The buyer or prospect becomes increasingly unhappy with their situation and looks to make a change. That process of solving the problem and doing things differently is what a sale is rooted in.

It amazes me how many sales opportunities I've assessed in my career, where the sales person didn't understand the problem the buyer was trying to solve. It's this lack of connection to the problem that undermines the ability of the salesperson to effectively sell and ultimately close the deal.

Understanding the problem is so critical because with the problem comes the impact of the problem and the impact defines the size and scope of the problem. A problem such as "I have a headache" can appear benign on the surface. However, depending on how it affects the person, the impact may be anything but benign, as suggested in the brain cancer example above. Problems get you to the impact and the impact is where urgency, value, and need live and where the sale takes root. You have to know the problem your buyers and prospects are struggling with and the impact it's having on them. Without it, there is no sale.

Truth # 2: In Every Sale, There's a Gap

Every sales transaction is about identifying a gap—the distance between where customers are now (their current state) and where they want to be (their future state). Take a person with a headache who wants to be a person without a headache. A merely annoying headache that in time will probably go away on its own is going to have a pretty minor impact on your life, so that's a small gap to fill, and not a very valuable one. But a migraine that could keep you from meeting a critical deadline on a \$500K project or attending a child's high school graduation ceremony? That's a damn big gap, and the person who can quickly fill it has something of tremendous value to offer. Frequently, however, the gap only *appears* small, and a little digging around reveals an impending sinkhole. Sometimes the gap appears bigger than it really is. Sometimes, it doesn't seem like there's a gap at all. But you can't know for sure what's real unless you look

closely.

The worst thing in the world you can do at the beginning of a sale is to take your buyer's word for granted or sell to a need. I know it's what we've been taught to do but a need assumes the customers know what they want, and that's a bad assumption. Sure, they *think* they know what their problem is, but what if they're wrong?

Do you remember Palm Pilots? They were basically smartphones without the phone piece, a glorified day planner and Rolodex. I had one in the early 2000s and I loved it. The batteries lasted forever so I rarely carried my charger. Well, one week I was in Boston for a conference, and the morning of the conference, I realized my battery had died. I couldn't access my schedule or contacts. I knew I had meetings all week, but didn't know with whom or where. Luckily, there was a Franklin Covey store in the conference center, and Franklin Covey was a Palm distributor. I know, how lucky was that? I walked into the store and asked the gentleman behind the counter if he had a Palm Tungsten T charger. He said he did. He then asked if he could interest me in anything else, like a case or something. A little perturbed, I said no. I had a case, I just wanted to get my Palm charged and get to my meetings. He grabbed a charger off the shelf, then walked back to me and put it down on the counter. He then asked me again, "Can I get you anything else?" I was like, *Come on, man! I just want a charger, stop trying to upsell me.* I was now visibly irritated. I said, "No!" and made it clear I just wanted to pay and go. But just as he was about to ring me up, he looked me in the eye and asked me a very interesting question: "Is the reason your Palm is out of battery life because when you put it in your briefcase or your pocket, the case presses on the buttons, holding them down until the battery runs out?"

"Yes!" I yelled, "That's exactly what happens!"

He said, "Hold on," turned around, took a case off the shelf behind him and put it on the counter. It looked like the exact same case I already had—same color, same brand, everything—but then he opened it up. On the inside were five cutouts where the buttons were so that the cover could no longer press on the buttons and drain the battery. It was brilliant.

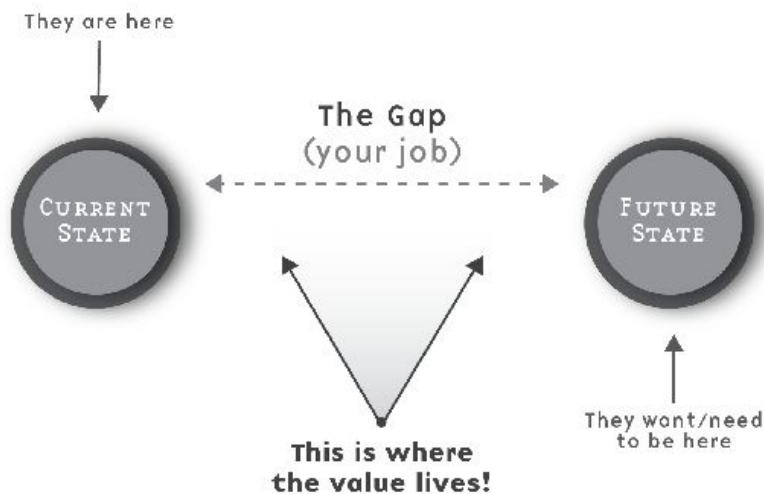
I bought the charger and the case.

You see, I thought I needed a charger, but I didn't. I only needed a charge. What I actually needed was a case that would stop my Palm from prematurely draining the battery. I didn't know what I needed because I wasn't focused on the real problem *and* because I didn't know what my options or solutions were. I didn't know what I needed.

Never sell to need. If you only solve the problem your buyer thinks they have instead of the one they really have, you haven't helped

them at all. You're like a doctor treating the symptoms instead of the disease. No, it's worse than that. You're like a doctor who has completely missed the fact that there is a disease! The real sickness is still lurking, and unchecked it could get much, much worse. To genuinely be of service to every customer, you have to go into every sale aware that what looks real, and what your customer thinks is real, might not be real.

Gap selling is a process of tactfully challenging buyers' assumptions, exposing (and sometimes confirming) the true size of their problem, then correctly assessing the impact it will have on their lives. The more impact, the larger the gap. And the larger the gap, the more valuable the solution, i.e., your product or service.



Truth #3: All Sales Are About Change

Answer this: Why do customers buy? If you're like most salespeople, you probably listed in your head one or more of the following reasons:

- They have a problem they need to fix
- They're not happy with what they have
- They need something new
- They can't get something done or do something they want
- There is an opportunity they can't achieve
- They are losing money, slow to market, or are experiencing some sort of pain

- They are stuck in a situation, or unable to move forward

All of that is true, but not one is the right answer. The answer is: Change! Whether they want something better or are getting away from something painful, customers buy because they've gotten uncomfortable and have identified something that will ease their discomfort. In other words, they feel a need to change.

Fortunately, that's what you're selling. I know you think you're selling stuff, like meds and breakfast foods and software and services, produce and picture frames, diet advice and data plans. But you're not. You're selling change.

Truth #4: Customers Don't Like Change (Even When They Say They Do)

It makes sense that people would respond apprehensively to unexpected, unwanted change because it makes them feel unsettled, particularly when it's initiated by cold-calling salespeople ready to pitch their products. But research indicates that humans don't actually like much of any change, unanticipated or not. Repeatedly, their behavior shows they value tradition, consistency, and familiarity over what's new, unconventional, and foreign. The whole category of dishes that we call comfort food exists because humans feel best when they are emotionally transported back to places and times enshrined in nostalgia. We generally feel good when we're in the presence of something that reminds us of Mom, or family, or the home where we grew up. Not only that, even when we have no personal connection, we tend to automatically attribute positive feelings toward people, places, and things that have been around a long time, or at least toward people, places, and things that we believe have been around for a long time. When you're selling change—and as you now know, all salespeople are selling change—that deep-rooted loyalty to the tried and familiar poses a challenge.

The Power of Longevity

Denise, a college student, is still shaking off last night's party as she trudges across her sun-dappled campus to class with her backpack slung across her shoulder when a guy holding a clipboard asks her if she'd like to taste some European chocolate and offer her opinion. She's a college student; she doesn't say no to free food. The square she is handed is a rich, glossy brown. She bites into it. Smooth. Sweet. Niiiiiice! Well, of course it is. After all, as he handed the chocolate to Denise, the clipboard dude informed her that the brand has been around for 73 years. That's almost a century! Nothing stays on the market that long without a reason, right? Denise bolts off, late for

class. A few minutes later, another student, Max, crosses the same spot, and he's also stopped by the same guy handing out chocolate. Max agrees to take a taste. The square he's handed is a rich, glossy brown. He's informed that this is a new brand, has been out for only three years, and is just now making its way to local supermarket shelves. He bites into it. Kind of waxy. Not too sweet. He declares it "meh." He moves on. When the dude with the clipboard types up the results from that day, he notes that although in reality, Denise's sample was the identical off-brand chocolate that Max tried, she gave it extremely high ratings—as did almost all the other students who were told the chocolate was an established brand. Conversely, the students who were told it was a new brand didn't rate it as highly; they didn't like it as much, yet it was the same chocolate.

A scenario like the one I just described really happened during a study at the University of Arkansas. It supports the idea that humans suffer from longevity bias, the phenomenon in which we ascribe more positive feelings toward things that have been around for a while than toward things that are new. Interestingly, when those in the study were given five choices by which to rank the reason for their opinion, they consistently marked time on the market as the least important reason. And when participants were asked open-ended questions to explain their opinion, none ever actually mentioned time on the market. Yet the data was consistent—every time participants thought the chocolate was an older, more established brand, they gave it higher marks than participants who thought the chocolate had only been on the market for three years. The suggestion of longevity had clearly subconsciously affected their judgment.

The phenomenon held true in other tests, too, such as when participants were asked to judge the aesthetic value of a painting or a tree. Consistently, the older the participants thought the object, the higher they rated it. The researchers wrote, "Because longevity promotes favorability, it may confer legitimacy." The studies suggest that whether we're talking about aesthetics, food, or tech, people are naturally inclined to subconsciously like and trust what they know and what is established and familiar. This means that even when people say they want change, deep down they often fear it. So even if your customer calls you expressing complete certainty that after ten years he is ready for a whole system overhaul, as the time comes closer to close the deal, his alarm bells are going to start to go off. If that's true of someone who actually initiated contact with you, imagine the shit show going on inside the head of a prospect you have called who isn't even sure he wants to be talking to you at all.

Truth #5: Sales are Emotional

Every sale is about change.

Change is emotional.

Therefore, every sale is emotional.

And emotions are complicated.

That, in a nutshell, explains why selling is so hard and why so many people are bad at it.

The kid buying his first car could be reeling at the thought of emptying the savings account it took him so long to fill. The business exec trying on ties might be self-conscious about his double chin. The CEO signing off on an expensive, complicated new quality control system is possibly crossing her fingers and hoping she can actually implement it. No sale is done in neutral. Humans can experience a complex range of emotions, and any one of them can conceivably show up at the core of a sale. Younger people might joyfully approach the purchase of a new home with the anticipation of a fresh start, while seniors might experience the moment as the beginning of a long, painful goodbye. A new service could spark a fiery determination to prove one's ability to compete and make more money, or it could inspire a crisis of insecurity. Some people are sentimental and reluctant to let go of the familiar; others are pragmatic and shrug off the old with ease. And sometimes people are just confused or conflicted. People frequently approach a sales transaction feeling fear, anxiety, or relief, but even genuine excitement can be accompanied by apprehension. Will your product live up to their expectations? Will they have regrets later? What if this service causes a whole new set of problems?

When you're asking your prospect to buy your product or service, how much change are you asking them to endure? Is it a lot or a little? Is it easily digestible or kinda hard to stomach? Have you done everything you can to make the change more palatable, less risky, and easier to embrace? If you're like most salespeople and sales organizations, the answer to that last question is no. In my experience, salespeople don't concern themselves too much with their customers' emotional state. They're entirely focused on their product. Or they're entirely focused on selling solutions, even though they haven't taken the time to find out what makes their customers' problems unique. You know what that does? It either scares customers or pisses them off. Yeah, it makes them *more* emotional.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, bestselling author and professor at Harvard Business School, says there are ten threats that cause people to resist change. Inadvertently triggering any one of them during the sales process could easily cause your buyers to pause and reconsider whether they really want to buy. Below are Kanter's ten threats:

1. Loss of control

Entire departments have seen their speed and efficacy transformed by your product, which allows multiple users to collaborate from anywhere. Your customer Jeannie, however, has been the funnel for her team's projects for years. Not only is she going to miss being the point person, now that everyone can input their changes any time they want, but she worries she won't be able to control the quality of the final result the way she used to. And now that the boss can see who did what and when, he might not think her contributions to the product are as stellar as he used to. Maybe this isn't such a good idea...

2. Excess uncertainty

Marcos wants to be perceived as a forward-thinking, innovative guy, but your product is so new to the market, there isn't much data or crowdsourcing feedback available yet. On second thought, maybe it would be safer to wait another year and see how well other companies fare with the product first...

3. Surprises

Tyson was about to walk away, but unexpectedly, you were given permission to offer him a great discount if he committed by the end of the quarter. He was lured back by the great deal, but now he has to scramble to get his superiors on board. Time is getting tight. He understands you don't want him to miss out, but your constant reminders and check-ins are stressing him out. He's aware of the deadline, thank you very much, but there's a protocol at his company and he has to follow it before he can get the green light. He worries that in the rush, a detail is going to fall through the cracks. The company has been doing OK without this new service. Maybe they don't need it as much as he thought they did...

4. Too much change at once

A new federal mandate has forced Carrie's company to make some rapid changes and she and all her team are feeling overwhelmed. She likes your product and wants to use it, but she's got two thousand other things to figure out. What's the point of purchasing now if she can't do it right, or if the product just sits there unused until she has time to get everyone up to speed? One thing at a time. Maybe this can wait...

5. Loss of face

Your new system is going to replace the one William implemented five years ago. He was really proud of it, but now he wonders if the company's decision to trade it in so soon reflects poorly on him.

Maybe it would be worth showing his boss how easily he could fix some of the minor glitches...

6. Insecurity

Robert pitched your start-up company's solution to his supervisors, but now that it's come down to the wire, he's realizing that he's toast if it doesn't work the way you promised it would. Maybe it would be smarter to call this off and go with the bigger, more established brand...

7. Extra work

Your product isn't complicated, but it is going to take some getting used to. All Adrienne can think about is how much time she's going to waste trying to figure out how to do things she used to be able to do without thinking twice. Maybe she should rethink the math on this one...

8. The ripple effect

Leela is thrilled about the increased efficiency your service is going to bring to her department, but she's dreading the complaints she's going to get from everyone further down the pipeline who are going to feel that less is not more. Maybe she should take one more look at that other service and see if it offers anything that can ease their concerns...

9. Past resentments

You've been completely up front with Dave, but after the last salesman hit him with all those unexpected fees, he's still suspicious that there's a catch. Maybe he should go with the smaller package, just to be safe...

10. Real danger

Oscar knows that your new software risks making several of his coworkers' jobs redundant. The human touch is critical to the customer experience. Maybe the company needs to rethink this move... ⁱⁱ

Most salespeople don't start out with a degree in psychology, but understanding your customers' emotional state—and especially what got them there—is key to closing a sale.

It's incredibly difficult to get people to change their opinions through sheer reasoning. It was emotion, not reason or even their own senses, that caused the college students to give high marks to certain off-brand pieces of chocolate. It was their respect for a brand that had supposedly been around longer than they had been alive. To them,

that immediately conveyed quality and because they felt it was quality chocolate, they enjoyed it as though it actually were quality chocolate.

Your customers' emotions will have *everything* to do with whether you successfully close the deal or not. Learn how to recognize these ten threats that can put your customer in an emotional state that is wholly uncondusive to buying. Know them well enough so that you'll identify when to deploy the techniques for diffusing them, which we'll cover later in this book.

Truth #6: Customers *Do* Like Change When they Feel It's Worth the Cost

What? Rule #3 states that People Don't Like Change! That's true—up to a point. They don't like change right up until the moment they think whatever discomfort they might experience, such as a higher price or the time spent struggling to learn a new system, will be worth the outcome.

People are led by their emotions. The only way humans willingly move toward change is when any negative emotions they may be experiencing about that change, um, change. For the better, of course. Humans feel positive emotions when they believe they are in control of their surroundings. When salespeople pitch customers and try to convince them to buy, they're imposing change, taking the control out of the customer's hands, and putting them on the defensive. That's a great way to sabotage a sale. Closing a sale is about helping customers feel safe enough to lay their defenses down and share their problems, then getting them to a point where they feel secure and confident enough to admit they're ready for change—either to something better, or to get away from something painful. They have to come to believe the change will be worth it.

Your buyer's or prospect's subconscious threat-o-meter will be asking questions like these:

Is this going to take a lot of research?

Am I willing to take the time to learn what I need to know to make this decision?

Do I want to make the effort?

Will this switch be worth the expense?

Will this move make me vulnerable?

What will be the consequences if I don't?

Is this change worth the risk?

Working through these questions can be a torturous process of weighing pros and cons, all of which are likely to be deeply affected by two influences we've already discussed: longevity bias and threats that trigger resistance to change. This can be true even when a customer expresses intense dissatisfaction with his current state. For example, even if a customer knows her team hates the web-based collaboration platform the company has been using for fifteen years and knows the one you are selling is more intuitive, more functional, and more efficient, the thought of all the growing pains her team will suffer as they learn the new system could easily cause her to put off making the change. Will the struggle be worth the benefits, even if efficiency and speed are sacrificed in the short-term? Will she still be able to provide the same caliber of customer service she always has? Will she be able to handle the stress? The dread could be enough to compel her to take the path of least resistance—that is, sticking with her current state—to minimize the risk and feelings of insecurity.

The only time we are compelled to let go of the old, stick out our necks, and embrace change is when we can envision an improved future state over our current state, and when we believe that the benefits of that future state outweigh the cost of getting there, the effort it will require or the possible pain we will suffer. That's true about everything, from business operations to job switches to deciding to get rid of your potbelly. Change only happens when the answer to every question listed above is a solid, confident “yes.”

Truth #7: Asking “Why” Gets Customers to “Yes”

Every time you ask “Why?” you chip away at the surface layers of your customer's psyche to get to their intrinsic motivations, the whole reason why they ever gave you a chance to talk to them in the first place. If you don't know what will motivate your buyers to change, you'll rarely get them to accept that the change you offer has enough value.

Careful readers will note that I said you'll rarely get the sale if you don't know your customer's intrinsic motivation, not that you never will. Remember how we talked about the danger of accepting your customer's problem at face value? They may be very up front about the problem they want to solve, but it may not occur to them to tell you the real reason they want to solve it. They may not even know it themselves. That reason is their intrinsic motivation, and there are consequences when you don't fully understand it.

For example, let's say that you have two customers who want new productivity systems that will allow them to delegate better so they

can take more time away from the office. You provide a solution that allows both to spend more time at home. Ultimately, however, their employees still find themselves having to frequently contact their managers to get their approval, and your customers still have to get online several hours per day to monitor projects. This suits one customer, whose intrinsic motivation for not coming into the office so frequently is to save on gas and avoid the road congestion that was making his blood pressure go dangerously high. Unfortunately, you didn't know that your other customer's motivation for getting that time at home was that she was about to adopt twins with special needs. The two customers were trying to solve the same problem for very different reasons. You helped one out, and he's happy. The other one is not, because all you did was help her trade in one problem for another.

Knowing your customer's intrinsic motivation allows you to solve for the problems your customers didn't know they had. Getting to the bottom of your customers' intrinsic motivation for change takes time and patience. And sometimes it's frustrating, because in the process you may discover that your product can't provide the exact solution they need. But if there's one thing we've learned in this new era, where not only you but also your customers can share every thought or observation as it hits them, it's that while people are often slow to say good things about a company online, they will take every opportunity to rip you to shreds if you disappoint or worse, lie. Don't risk it by selling something that causes side effects as unpleasant as the original problem your customer wanted to solve. Learning to find out "why" can save you time and your reputation. If you find out that your product can't fulfill a customer's intrinsic motivation, walk away from the sale. Never sell something that can't deliver.

You will have to learn to dig deep and not give up your line of questioning until you thoroughly understand the driving force behind your customer's motivation to change (a skill you will learn in Part II). The more you do this, the less anyone will care about the number of years you've been in business, or what awards you've won, or how many branches you have. Trumpeting feature benefits that may or may not be of value to your customer will not get you closer to the sale. Mentioning your place on the Fortune 500 will not get you any closer to the sale. In fact, every time you talk about yourself, you risk triggering those change-resistant, emotionally fraught thoughts and feelings in your customers.

The only thing that inches you toward a sale is proving that you understand your customers' problems and the impact of those problems, that you know why they're struggling, that you understand why they're not happy with their current state, that you hold the key

to moving them to the future state they desire, and that the change they are facing will be worth the money and effort it takes to get there. They want to learn how you can help them grow revenue, decrease production time, improve their communication or speed up their delivery. They want to know how you're going to make their lives better. They want you to prove that you understand their needs and can provide a customized solution that makes the future state look better than the state they're in right now.

Truth #8: Sales Happen When the Future State is a Better State

What kind of better future states do customers want?

- An edge over the competition
- Paths to previously unexplored markets
- Increased profits
- More rapid path to market
- Heightened investor interest
- Millions of dollars in savings
- Streamlined manufacturing processes
- The eye of the new generation
- Faster communications
- Happier, more engaged employees
- Better customer retention
- Improved personal service
- More leads
- Increased response times
- Revenue

These are just a handful of possibilities that might compel your customers to buy a product, retain a service or make an investment. How many does yours offer? This is not a rhetorical question.

Understand the Current State to Improve the Future State

You can't sell a future state (where your customer wants to be) unless

you have a firm grasp on your customer's current state (where your customer is now). The current state is the environment in which your customer currently operates, and where their problems reside. You're going to do a deep dive into your customer's current state to suss out those problems, but first you're going to need to create a document to help you in this process. It's called a Problem Identification Chart, and you will create one even before you start reaching out to prospects. On a sheet of paper, you'll write down every problem your product or service can solve for your prospects and customers. First, make a column and call it "Problems." They might be low close rates, missed deadlines, communication gaps, or an inability to move inventory or generate more leads. These should be the real problems your prospects are suffering. Then, you'll create a column called "Impact." In this column, you'll list the impact those problems could have on a customer, should they exist. The impact of low close rates, for example, could be a high cost of sales, where too much money is being spent to bring in the few sales that do go through. Maybe the impact is also slow revenue growth, fewer customers, and increased vulnerability to the competition. Finally, in a third column called "Root Cause," you'll list the root causes of the problems you mentioned in the first column. The root causes are why the problems exist in the first place. You'll learn quickly that while there could be a myriad of ways for problems to impact customers, you will only be able to attribute a finite number of root causes to those problems. We'll go into more detail about how to think through this preparatory exercise in Part II of this book. For now, it's good for you to be aware that it's coming.

You might be tempted to skip this step when we get to it. Don't. Understanding ahead of time the problems your customers could be dealing with in their current state is critical for gap-selling success. You'll want to think about this process as the equivalent of filling up your toolbox. You'll find the Problem Identification Chart is an indispensable reference once you start the discovery process, and even when you're prospecting.

Truth #9: No One Gives a Shit About You

Ted checked his phone. He had promised his wife he'd be home early tonight so he could make dinner, but at the last minute he had agreed to take a meeting with a rep from Blot, a print services company who wanted a chance to tell him how she could provide cheaper machines, better maintenance, disposal, waste reduction, and an eco-friendlier toner than the company currently servicing his midsized office. He had hoped to schedule an online presentation, but the rep had promised not to take too much of his time if she could come to him,

and he was the type of person who believed that face-to-face meetings were the best way to gauge someone's trustworthiness. As he and his purchasing manager settled into the chair at the head of his small conference room, his glowing mobile screen assured him that he still had plenty of time to squeeze in this meeting and leave by 5 p.m.

Upon entering, the woman now standing across from him had offered a firm handshake and introduced herself as Mandi "with an 'i,' not a 'y.'" Now Mandi straightened her gray blazer and smiled confidently.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me, Ted. I promise you won't be sorry. I've worked at a number of print companies, and I'm still impressed with what we have to offer. Let me begin by filling you in a little on the history of the company. We were founded by Jim Floramund, whose childhood fascination with calligraphy led him on a lifetime pursuit of creating the perfect ink and an obsession with the machines that use it. Starting with one small printing store in Tacoma, he grew the business to service the entire Washington State area, and now we have 1,300 locations nationwide. As the digital age approached, Jim, a prescient and forward-thinking entrepreneur, quickly expanded to scanners and all the other technology every company like yours needs to run their business. A die-hard environmentalist (he spent three years with Greenpeace!), he also made it his mission to develop a non-toxic, planet-friendly toner that could double as a fertilizer. I've brought you a sample that you can try on your plants at home. It's done wonders for my rose bushes! Anyway, Ted, I know what you really want to hear from me so I'll get right to the point. We at Blot pride ourselves on providing the very best service for our customers. We value you like family. I've put together a list of all the customer service awards we've received over the years and . . ."

Ted and his purchasing manager exchanged looks across the table. What the . . .?

After ten minutes of this, Ted finally spoke up, struggling to keep his voice level. "Mandi, I allowed you to come here because I'm tired of watching my employees deal with broken, jammed machines, and of getting grainy printouts when I ask for documents. Over the phone you also told me you could offer some cost-cutting and waste reduction ideas. Could we get to it, please?"

Mandi looked surprised and gave a curt nod. "Absolutely, Ted. I've saved the best for last. But first, let me show you this spreadsheet tracking the sourcing of all our products . . ."

Ted did manage to leave the office by 5 p.m., but it shouldn't come as much of a surprise to learn that Blot didn't get the sale.

Many salespeople would write this example off as silly or

exaggerated, but let's keep it real: How many of you who are responsible for buying have been subjected to meetings like this one? Worse, how many of you salespeople have ever conducted a meeting like this one? I know you're out there. And I know you mean well. But every time you pitch a customer without immediately focusing on the specific things your customers care about, you are no different, and are selling no better, than Mandi with an "i."

We're In the Show-Me Economy

We are now in the show-me economy. The tell-me economy is dead, over. So if you're still trying to "tell" your prospect what you do, what your product does, and why you matter, you're wasting their time. And in today's world, prospects are not keen on having their time wasted.

The tell-me economy was pre-internet. It was a time when prospects and customers expected us to tell them who we were, what we'd done and how great we were. It was part of the game. There was literally no other way for prospects to learn who we were and what made us different; telling was what we did.

With the arrival of the internet, we can now show who we are and what we do long before we even know a customer is interested in us, and long before we ever have our first conversation. Therefore, the days of wasting time in meetings and sales calls telling the prospect are over. We've discussed how good selling is all about helping people get ready for change, and to do that, you have to get customers to trust you. For some reason, a lot of salespeople seem to think that means that once they get a customer to take a meeting, the best way to build that trust is to start off by blathering on about their number of years in the business, their piles of awards, their ranking on the INC 5000 list, how great their product is, what other companies use their product, who has endorsed their product, etcetera. This is just brutal. Your customer doesn't want to hear it, I promise. So, stop it. Just stop it. If your boss, your CEO, or your marketing department insists you put that crap in your deck or pitch, you send them to me. I'll set them straight.

I promise you, no one gives a shit about you, your company, or your product.

I know what you're thinking. You're like, wait, Keenan said people have a longevity bias and therefore they like stuff that's been around for a while. Yes, it's in salespeople's best interest to make sure their customers know all about the company and its accolades, its rank on the INC 5000 lists, and the number of years it's been in business, especially if you've been around a long time, and so on. They just don't want to hear all that crap in the sales meeting. That's what the

internet is for. Let the internet do its job, and you do yours.

During the tell-me economy, before the internet, it made sense to ingratiate ourselves with our customers by starting a meeting with a chatty introduction explaining who we were, how long we'd been in business, and by sharing evidence that we knew what we were doing. Maybe we'd hand over some type of pretty sales collateral highlighting a couple of key company or product facts. We put a lot of money into advertising. It built credibility. How else could our customers learn anything about us? Then, a little over two decades ago, the internet was born and propelled us into the show-me economy, and businesses began to rely on their websites to tell the world about themselves and their products. Still, there was only so much we could put up on a website. Our tools were limited, and it wasn't uncommon for buyers to know very little about who you were or what you and your company were all about.

Today, social platforms allow us to show the world the value we provide. We don't need to tell them about ourselves face-to-face; they know before we meet them. We have better options. Now you can produce an e-book for your prospects to download that shows off the depth and breadth of your knowledge. Now you can write an article for LinkedIn twice a week. Now you can create blog posts, how-to videos, and podcasts that prove you know how to address your clients' challenges. Now you can build active, engaged Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat accounts. Now you can reach out to influencers and make guest appearances on their platforms. The content you create day to day, week to week, and year to year reflects the evolution of your business as well as that of your experience and your capabilities. You can share your thoughts on industry trends, dive into the implications of new state or federal legislation, react to pop culture, and offer a peek at what goes on behind the scenes at your company or in your daily life. You can establish a connection with your customers long before you ever actually connect. On all channels, you can show anyone who wants to check out what you do instead of being limited to telling them what you have done.

Like you, your customers are crazy busy. They aren't going to take the time to meet with you without looking you up online to learn more about your company or product. If they go so far as to reach out to connect with you, you'll know that you've shown them enough to give them reason to believe that you could hold the answer to their problem. When they do, I guarantee it will not be so you can tell them more about yourself or your company. They'll connect because they want to learn if or how you can solve the current problems affecting them.

Selling is a giving profession. Every time you engage with a

customer, or send an email, or create something, you have to ask yourself, “What am I giving?” The answer should be “industry information,” or “insight into the market,” or “tips that will make their jobs easier,” or “the solution to a problem they haven’t been able to solve.” It should never be, “More information about myself.” Sales are not about you! So, quit the self-centered “me, me, me” and start focusing on them, them, them. Because I promise, your customers don’t give a shit about you or your company. They only care about what you can do for them.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CURRENT STATE—WHERE CUSTOMERS ARE

Have you ever watched someone close to you try to get a baby to eat something he didn't want to eat? Even the most easy-going baby will scrunch up his face like an over-baked apple after noticing even the tiniest portion of some food he's decided offends him, like steamed carrots or spinach. Most parents get that it's going to take some time for a child to develop a taste for certain flavors, so they're prepared to eat or toss whatever the baby rejects and try again another day. What doesn't compute, however, is when a baby turns his nose up at something he's been eating with pleasure for weeks. All of a sudden, mashed potatoes are poison. Again, to a parent it's confusing and surprising, but not a huge problem, until the kid starts reacting the same way to everything they put in front of his high chair. Then feeding time becomes a huge daily battle with a certain outcome: The baby is going to win. There's not much anyone can do to make a child swallow something he doesn't want to. It's one of the most frustrating rites of passage in a new parent's life.

The thing is, kids usually have very good reasons for behaving the way they do, even if they're pre-verbal or can't articulate them very well. If only they could tell us at an earlier stage in their lives, "Mom, Dad, I had mashed potatoes at daycare that makes yours taste like cement. Please, don't feed me this slop anymore until you learn to love salt and butter like I do." Problem solved and drama averted, because now we know exactly what reality our child is experiencing, how it affects him, and how it has influenced his thinking and perspective. That's vital information. In one simple sentence, he has given us the context and reason for his hunger strike, which means we can start figuring out a way to give him a reason to eat.

The thing is, this dynamic is not reserved for parent-child showdowns. Everything we do, whether we're six months old or sixty years old, is influenced by an invisible backdrop of events, feelings, and biases that affect the way we perceive the world and react to each other. They all play into the creation of our current state. Your customers have a current state, too, that includes everything we've talked about so far—their feelings about change, their intrinsic motivations, the realities of their business, and the facts of their work lives. Their current state is the world they live in, their perceived reality. And when we salespeople understand our buyers' current state, we're in a much better position to effectively communicate, which also puts us in a good position to find solutions to their problems.

The Current State Runs Deep

To put the rules of gap selling into play requires that you gain a deep comprehension of your customers' current state and the opportunities it represents for a better future state. It is critical to understand what is happening in your prospects' world today. The current state represents where the desire to change lives. The current state acts as the anchor, or the catalyst for change. Remember, we're talking about change, and you cannot influence change unless you know what's happening in your buyers' world. The more you learn about your buyer's current state, the greater you understand the changes necessary, and the more information you will have to close the deal. There is a direct correlation between how much a salesperson knows about their buyer's current state and the probability they will win the deal. The majority of the information and elements you need to influence the sale come from understanding exactly where your buyer is today, what they are dealing with, how they're operating, who's involved, why it's happening, the outcomes they're currently experiencing and more—all part of the current state.

Remember the headache example in Chapter 1? There were three potential current states suggested. If a salesperson is unable to ascertain whether her customer has a headache and that's all, or has a headache and has to get a half-million-dollar proposal done in 12 hours, or has a headache as a result of brain cancer, she will most likely sell to each of these people the same way, because to her, they all have the same problem—a headache. But as we've learned, that's not true. The current state is what lets us see not only the problem, but also the real issues for each specific buyer. The current state is the unique identifier for every prospect in your pipeline. It's critical to get as much current-state information as you can at the start of every sale. You will do this excavation of the current state during your discovery (details to come in Chapter 8). The current state is made up of five critical elements that help construct your understanding of your customers' world in a way that will help you help them manage the change they are about to experience:

- the literal and physical **facts** about your customer
- their **problems**
- the **impact** of those problems
- the **root causes** of the problems
- what effect those problems are having on your customers' **emotional state**

That's it. How clearly and thoroughly you uncover those five elements of your customers' current state will determine how you can provide value to your customers.

The Facts

Gap selling requires you to know and understand more about your customer's world than what you're probably accustomed to. There is far more to it than what they reveal on their websites. Your goal must be to understand everything you can about what's happening in their organization as it relates to what you sell. What are the literal, physical things going on every day? It requires finding information you've never thought about looking for. You're going to need to go on a pure fact-finding mission. That said, you want to focus your investigation on the parts of the business your product or service could actually affect. It is a waste of your and your customer's time to explore problems that your solution can't resolve. You want to gather as much specific, *relevant* information as possible. We'll go over specific questioning techniques in Chapter 8 when we dive into the discovery process in detail. Suffice to say, however, that if you're selling project management software, it's probably not going to be a great idea to guide your buyers toward talking to you about their HR departments. Nor do you need to know about their competition, their sales, or their customers (unless your buyers' inability to properly manage projects affects their customers, in which case you *will* want to know all about their customers, too).

On the other hand, because you're selling project management software, you *do* want to understand the types of projects your customers have, the size of their projects, how many projects they do in a year, in what functional groups the projects occur, how many people are in the project management group, the success of their projects, the length of the projects, what types of projects they manage, the output of the projects, how they manage resources, how they manage inventory, how they address change management, and how they handle approvals. Whew! That's a lot, right? But that's what you have to understand, and in many cases there will be even more to learn. The more information you have about your buyers' environment, how they do things, what's happening, how they're structured, the current approaches they use, and their methodologies, the better prepared you will be to drive the sale as it moves through the sales process.

Every customer faces unique challenges. No company's project management office, for example, is going to be the same. They will have different processes, different measurements, different structures, different people, different pain points, different outcomes, and more.

By understanding the *unique* conditions of each of your prospects' current environment and their current state, however, you will be able to develop specific, customized selling strategies for each of the prospects in your pipeline. No two prospects will ever look the same again, and therefore never sold to the same again. And that matters.

The Problems

People don't buy products—they buy solutions to their problems. If they can't recognize at least one clearly defined, measurable problem, your buyer will not buy. So, in order for you to sell your product or service, you must identify and prove the existence of a clear problem, or even a set of them. And the problems are there, embedded in every one of your prospects' current states. They are the outcomes of the current processes, the current organizational structures, the current software applications, the current employees, the current governmental regulations, the current economic climate, the current leadership, the current culture, and so on. It's your job as a salesperson to find them and understand the impact they're having on your prospects.

The Impact

All the information you're looking for when you are fact-finding and problem hunting culminates or expresses itself in good things and bad. You may have found that the project management software company does a brilliant job managing their assets and that the process they use is best of breed and unparalleled in the industry. That's a good-looking current state. However, you may also learn that the way they manage time and change orders is cumbersome, inaccurate, and prone to mistakes. The impact of cumbersome, inaccurate, and mistake-laden change order processes—the problem—is high cost overruns, which in turn reduces the capital the company has for additional projects, which in turn impacts their ability to invest in as many new products as they want to, which in turn reduces their ability to introduce new products in the market faster, which in turn hurts their ability to compete with their biggest competitor and grow as fast as they'd like. The problem is simple: high-cost overruns. That's the headache in this example. But all the shit that high-cost overruns affect is the impact, and that's what drives the sale. It's where the intrinsic motivation lives. High-cost overruns suck, but only as badly as the impact to the organization. If running over budget doesn't impact the rest of the business, then one could argue it's not a problem. Problems are only problems when the impact is negative and uncomfortable.

So, knowing the problem and the impact it's having matters. Keep this firmly in mind: You're never selling a product. You're selling the

impact your product will have on your buyer's current environment. You're selling change.

The Root Cause

Why do problems exist? Because something isn't working right. Something is creating a situation that is causing things to go wrong. Those "things" are the root cause, and it's what your product or service will eradicate if the prospect buys your product. If your car won't run (the problem), the root cause could be no gas, dead battery, or a broken starter. One problem, three potential root causes, each requiring a different solution. Once you know which root cause is the culprit, you'll know the appropriate solution.

There are root causes behind every one of the problems your customer is experiencing, and you have to understand what they are. For example, let's say you have confirmed that your customer's main problem is a lack of leads. What could be the causes? It could be the team doesn't know how to prospect. A lack of marketing. Poor marketing messages. Going after the wrong target market. Using ineffective marketing software. It could be any one of these, or something else. It's not enough to understand that the problem exists. You need to understand why it exists. That's how you demonstrate you can solve the problem.

Think about it this way: What's the only thing that could be more frustrating and painful than frequent heartburn? Going to five doctors who offer five different explanations for your symptoms and prescribe five different medications, none of which work. The doctor who finally gives you an angiogram, confirms that your heartburn is a symptom of arterial blockage, and performs the angioplasty that permanently relieves your discomfort—the one who takes the time to figure out the root cause of the problem and eliminates it—is the one who will earn your loyalty and trust forever. You don't want to be like those other doctors, taking guesses and offering solutions that may or may not work. You want to be the astute, reassuring expert who knows how to solve the problem because you know why the problem exists.

The Emotional State

Finally, as you explore your customers' current state and identify the inherent problems and opportunities, it's important that you stay attuned to their emotional state. Throughout the process, it's imperative that you take note of where your customers are coming from and how they're feeling as they describe their current state. Are they frustrated? Angry? Afraid? Remaining aware of your customer's emotional state will not only help you avoid the fear triggers we

discussed earlier, but will help you deliver your advice and solutions in a way that your customer is able to properly hear and absorb.

Learning to deconstruct your customer's current state and use that information to their benefit is a skill that, once learned, will elevate your value and serve as an important differentiator between you and other salespeople. It's a process that takes concentration and patience, but provides extraordinary value to your customer and to yourself. Analyzing the factors causing your customer's current state gives you the key to figuring out how your product or service can help them, thus propelling them toward the better future state they want to achieve

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FUTURE STATE— WHERE CUSTOMERS WANT TO GO

As I've said, the future state is that place where your customers want to be—a happy place where your product or service has solved their problems and they are reaping the benefits. The future state is what draws your customer toward change. It's the vision your buyer has when they imagine their current problems resolved. When it comes to change, the current state represents the pain, and the future state represents the pleasure.

Your customers' current state maps their future state. Once you understand your customers' current state problems, you can start to work with them to paint a picture of what the future state could look like when those current state problems have been addressed. That's how you'll find the next piece of information you're looking for—the *opportunities*.

Let's say you were examining the current state of a hotel manager who is struggling to attract events and conferences (the problem). That's hurting the business' ability to meet revenue numbers (impact #1), and now he's getting pressure from corporate (impact #2). Employees are feeling disgruntled and leaving (impact #3), which is putting the business' reputation for customer service at risk (impact #4).

What would this manager's desired future state be? You can find out by asking these two questions: 1. What is the buyer looking to accomplish? and 2. What would solving these problems mean to their organization, their employees, and to them? The key to answering these questions is to have a conversation with your customer that helps them envision and articulate what their world would look like if all their current state problems disappeared. This way, you both can learn how addressing the current state could have a positive effect on them. For example, if you ask the right questions, the hotel manager might mention that he needs a more effective way to increase events and conference bookings (the problem solved), to get back to 20% growth (impact of solving the problem), in order to have a predictable, reliable corporate event schedule with 80% conference room utilization (impact). This would then let the company reach their profitability goals of 22% (impact), which currently they are not meeting because of the lack of conferences and events.

By working to understand the customer's desired future state, you begin to build the gap. The future state acts as a contrast to the current state. Without the future state, it's difficult to calculate the

value of the deal. Recall the headache example in Chapter 1 again. Being able to finish the proposal and earning a \$50K commission after winning the deal is the future state. Being able to cure the cancer and living 30 years longer, walking your daughter down the aisle, and having grandchildren is the future state. It's not enough to cure the headache. What's the desired outcome of solving the headache? That's the future state. And that's why it's so important.

Don't Forget the Emotional State

While you're at it, you also want to understand how your customers will feel once their problems have been addressed. Why? Because getting people to imagine their emotions in the future, as well as bringing their dreams and desired outcomes into focus, will anchor them in that future. After all, it's a place where they will feel a hell of a lot better than they do in the current state, right? It's a place where they get to see the fruits of their efforts, where they could realize all of the goals they set for themselves or their organization. You want them to get a taste of what could be so that they're motivated to make the changes necessary to get to that future state. Solving problems isn't just about fixing what's wrong in the short-term, but helping people move toward their long-term dreams. The more concrete that future state feels, the more they're going to be willing to listen as you show them how your solutions can get them there for real. Then Selling Truth #5—Customers Do Like Change When They Believe It's Worth the Cost—will come into play. Once your customers believe that the benefits of the future state will outweigh the cost of getting there, the deal is done.

Establishing your customers' current state (pain) while anchoring them in the future state (pleasure) primes them to be open to, and even enthusiastic about, allowing you to help them plan for the journey that will take them across the chasm. As you help them see the gap they have to cross, they'll determine the value of filling it. I promise you, that value will be higher if you encourage your buyers to put themselves in the mindset of that future state, far higher than if you had simply exposed their current state problems and left them to wallow there. That's the magic of gap selling.

CHAPTER FIVE

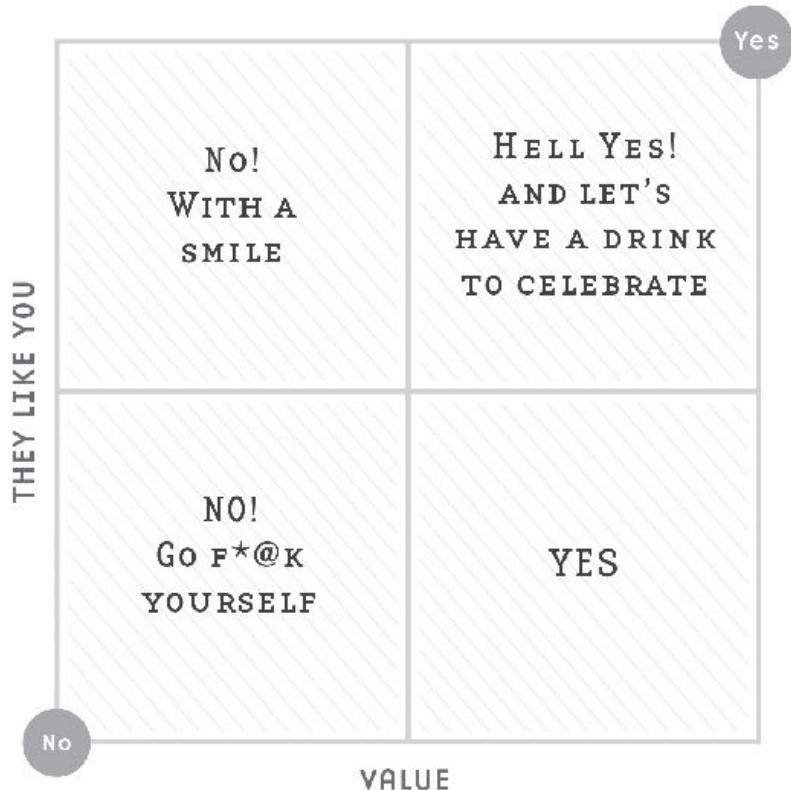
RELATIONSHIPS DON'T MATTER (KINDA)

Ok, people, you've heard it your whole career: People buy from people they like. I call bullshit. And if you want to gap sell, you will too. It might not be a surprise to learn that of all the controversial things I've ever said in public, that's the one that's gotten the most pushback. Still, I stand by it. Stay with me here. I'll have you agreeing with me over the next few pages.

Don't Worry About Making Them Like You

People buy from people they like. Willy Loman, protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, was sure of it. "It's not what you do... It's who you know and the smile on your face!"^v In Loman's world, likeability supersedes every other human quality. "Be liked and you will never want,"^{vi} he tells his sons, who take too long to recognize how horribly wrong he is. He clings to his beliefs even as he's forced to confront the reality that he's a failure and a fraud, even as his only friend in the world assures him, "When're you gonna realize that them things don't mean anything? The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell."^{vii}

Willy Loman had to learn the hard way, unfortunately, that likeability is no substitute for talent or expertise. *Likeability* gets you a handshake, a smile, and maybe a warm and fuzzy feeling. *Expertise* makes you money. Because you know who people do buy from? Those who provide value. I may not like you personally, but if you're selling something that provides value, I want it. You only have to look at all the book lovers that abandoned their local bookstores for Amazon, or the shoppers who started getting their groceries at big supermarkets instead of their neighborhood butcher and fruit vendor. The buyers knew they were hurting a business they liked, but the value they were getting from the other, bigger stores was too good to pass up. They valued convenience and lower prices over their personal relationship with their local shopkeepers. We do business with people we don't like all the time. You can see how people justify their buying decisions in the chart below:



Let's say you get a text from your former co-worker, Evan. He's selling an extra ticket to see Drake in concert tomorrow night and thought of you. This chart can predict how you'll respond (let's assume you're good for the money). If you think Evan is a cool dude and you like Drake, you jump on the offer. If you really like Evan but aren't a big Drake fan, you thank him for thinking of you and suggest another mutual friend. If Evan drove you crazy when you worked together but you're also crazy about Drake, you probably decide it's worth suffering through Evan to be at that concert. And if Evan drives you crazy *and* you don't give a damn about Drake, you say no, if you even call him back in the first place.

It's not that relationships aren't important. They are. After all, no one wants to do business with someone they can't stand. But it's not why people buy. With all things being equal, buyers will go with whom they like, but rarely are all things equal. Buyers can respect and appreciate someone whom they don't actually like. Buyers want value and they find it in relationships with people whom they believe can solve their problems and improve their world.

What creates the types of relationships that generate value and drive you closer to the sale? Credibility. Every step you make in the gap-selling process is about building credibility and establishing

yourself as a trustworthy expert.

Early in my career, I had a sales manager who told me there were two types of salespeople: the ones who were great at socializing and building relationships, and the ones who developed credibility. They were both great at their jobs, but the former would always have a smaller piece of the business than the latter. People want to go to hockey games with their friends; they want to *buy* from people who know their shit.

And if there's one thing I hope you've figured out by now, it's that gap selling is all about knowing your shit. And all of your customers' shit, for that matter. I've always said that the best salespeople could drop out of sales at a moment's notice and start a consulting company that caters to the field in which they sell. That's how much you should know about your customers' business. Your expertise and credibility are worth a lot more to your buyers than your quick wit, warm friendly manner, or tickets to the ballgame.

I get a lot of flak for challenging this bit of sales dogma, but there is evidence that I'm right. In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson, authors of *The Challenger Sale*, summarized research conducted in 2009 by the Sales Executive Council that studied the sales productivity of 6,000 B2B sales reps working in various industries across the country. They concluded that salespeople could be categorized into five different profiles: Relationship Builders (the people pleasers), Hard Workers (the grinders), Lone Wolves (the John Wayne and Clint Eastwood types), Reactive Problem Solvers (the dedicated firefighters), and Challengers. All of these types of salespeople have their gifts and could be effective, but the most effective consistently proved to be Challengers.

Challengers are defined as salespeople who are so knowledgeable about their customers' industry and organization, and as a result are so well respected, they can pretty much speak their minds at any time, and even push their customers to consider ideas that may make them uncomfortable. In other words, they are willing to challenge their buyers if it's in their buyers' best interest, and their buyers seem to appreciate it. The study revealed that Challengers held a full 40% of the top sales spots, more than any of the other types of seller, and especially more than Relationship Builders, who only represented 7% of the high performers. Rather than putting their relationship with their customers at risk, Challengers' frank and assertive style actually seems to strengthen their relationships.

Now everyone knows that the economy was in the toilet in 2009 and the authors of the study wondered if maybe Challengers were merely the type of salespeople that buyers felt they needed in tough times to keep their ships upright. Perhaps once the economy righted

itself, the Relationship Builders would get back on top and reclaim their mantles. But when the authors allowed for higher complexity and “solutions-oriented selling environments,” Challengers continued to dominate. Like me, Dixon and Adamson insist that the findings don’t imply that relationships don’t matter. Rather, they suggest that it’s the *type* of relationship that matters. Buyers want to have a good experience with their sales reps, but ultimately, they’re looking for trustworthy advice and guidance. And when it comes down to it, even if they’d rather drink a beer with a Relationship Builder, they know it’s the sales rep who is capable of telling them the truth, including things they’d rather not hear, who is probably giving them the best information and value.^{viii}

Another study, conducted by Dave Kurlan, principal of Objective Management Group, reveals that salespeople who have a strong need to be liked actually hurt their selling efficacy. Let me state that again: *Salespeople who spend extra time trying to be liked—because, you know, people buy from people they like—hurt their selling efficacy.* Take a second to let that sink in. If you’re trying to be liked because people buy from people they like, you’re killing yourself. You’re literally the reason you’re not doing well. Kurlan claims that there are six core competencies in sales DNA, the first of which (and the only one relevant to our discussion) is: Doesn’t Need Approval. When he dissected the data, salespeople who scored low on the first strength (meaning they *do* feel a need for approval) consistently fell in the bottom 25% selling percentile. In fact, 82% of the salespeople in the bottom quarter reported a need to be liked.^{ix}

In a later blog post, Kurlan compared salespeople’s need to be liked with their belief that relationships are important. Of the performers in the top 5% of sales percentile, 89% did not feel a need to be liked, and only 1% believed relationships were the key factor to closing business.^x How about that? It would seem that the less you worry about being liked and the more emotionally detached and fact-based you can remain, the more capable you are at objectively evaluating your customers’ needs, offering sage advice, and winning customer trust so they believe you are the right person to help them solve their problems, i.e., to buy from.

So, if gap selling puts a priority on building relationships based on credibility, not likability, and we’re doing away with the tired, “Good selling is all about relationships” mantra, what could we put in its place? I think it’s pretty simple:

Be an expert, not a friend.

CHAPTER SIX

The Gap Defined

I think it's become pretty clear by now what the gap is. Quite simply, it is the space between the current state and the future state. The gap is where the value of the sale lives. The less drastic the distance between where you are and where you could go, the smaller the gap—the less value there is in changing, and therefore, the less urgent it is for the customer to buy what you're selling. If you're suffering from a minor headache that is easily eliminated with a cheap over-the-counter drug, there is not much difference between your current state—Headache Central—and your future state—Headache Free. There just isn't that much of a reason to change. See, there's that word again: change. A small gap doesn't represent much difference from the status quo. However, if you're suddenly hit with a life-threatening infection that could kill you in 24 hours, there's a massive gap between your current state and your future state if the future state you want is one in which you die fifty years from now surrounded by children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The thing is, the gap is rarely clear to buyers initially. The win then becomes your ability to expose and shape the gap. Salespeople can manipulate the size of the gap by helping the buyer see things they didn't see before. There is no way customers can understand the value of your life-saving pill if they don't realize they are dying. That's why you have to spend so much time exploring their current state and helping them envision their future state. Unlike a traditional salesperson, you're not going to accept their problems at face value and then offer a solution. Instead, you're going to help your customers make sure they understand the full extent of their problems and let them figure out for themselves what will happen if they don't do something about it.

Here is an illustration of the gap in action:



You're not selling when you ask your customers questions about their current and future states. What you're actually doing is expanding their perception of their problem and the perceived outcome of solving the problem. Good salespeople have to be able to ask questions that subtly test and challenge the customers' perceived current state to see if the gap is bigger than anyone realized. Your role is to crystallize the stakes for them and help them conclude the salesperson who possesses something that can make that future state come true is selling something of real value.

Sometimes the process can work the other way, too. If, while exploring your customers' current state, you discover that their problems are actually quite limited and that there isn't much distance to cover before they can get to their desired future state, you've just shrunk the gap. When you've done your homework and know exactly how your product or service can alter the course of potential customers' problems, you also know what it *can't* do. If you identify a small gap, you may realize that there really isn't that much you can do to help, or that in the end your customer doesn't actually need you. That's OK. In fact, it's super valuable. Knowing you're dealing with a small gap keeps you from wasting your time chasing after a sale that's never going to happen (leaving you more time to concentrate on sales that will), and allows you to serve your customer by redirecting them toward someone who can actually help.

Naturally, however, when your customers recognize that there's a big gap between their current and future state, they will be inclined to turn to you, the person who guided them toward this epiphany, for the sale.

You still with me?

.....

If you refuse to believe in these fundamentals, don't bother reading the rest of the book, because in the next section you'll learn everything you need to know to methodically and effectively work through all the steps we reviewed above. You have to accept and understand the framework of the process if you want to gap sell well. Your buy-in is crucial, or nothing you're about to learn will work the way you want it to.

Got it? Good.

PART II

HOW TO PLAY

You gotta know how to play the game to win.

PART II . HOW TO PLAY

Part I of this book was devoted to defining the concepts of gap selling and helping you get your head in the right place to do it well. Part II is going to walk you through the execution, with all the steps and techniques you need to know to put those concepts into practice.

This would be a good time to take a pee break or to grab a Red Bull or a cup of coffee. When you get back, just turn the page.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Get Them to Let You Help

Nothing we've discussed in Part I can happen unless you get this critical and fundamental premise through your head: Your number one job when selling is to get the customer, buyer, or prospect to let you help them.

All that time you're spending trying to get your prospects to take a call, take a demo, or take a meeting will be a complete waste if you don't do it in such a way as to make prospects believe that you have the expertise and credibility to solve their problem. No matter what you're selling, until you can get buyers to trust you enough to be vulnerable, open up, share information, offer you insight into their current state, and expressly *ask* you for your help, you will not make progress. Customers have to be ready to initiate and embrace this sales journey, or ain't nothing gonna happen.

What about bluebirds or inbound calls? Well, sure, you can sell to them without actively working to get them to trust you first, but that's because they've already figured out they need help. They may be totally wrong about the kind of help they need, but at least they are aware they need you and are seeking you out. You also have to consider that they wouldn't have reached out to your company in the first place if it hadn't done something to make them suspect your company might hold the answers they're looking for. Something in its content or on the website, or something your company said in an interview, an article, a speaking engagement, or even a simple Google search, spoke to them. Therefore, it's likely that your company actually did do the groundwork; you just didn't know it hit your mark. Regardless of where or how the lead came to you, outbound or inbound, once you start engaging with a prospect, they have to be continually willing to let you help them.

What about RFPs? Nope. Bidding on an RFP is not selling, it's participating in a beauty contest. The only thing a buyer who submits an RFP is paying attention to is which boxes you can check off of their list of requirements. You can't ask why, you can't make sure you understand their problem, and you can't make sure *they* understand their problem. They're not letting you help them. Consequently, as it relates to RFPs, gap selling can't help you. Traditional RFPs that don't allow for a solid discovery or engagement don't fall into the gap-selling methodology.

From the very beginning, selling starts with establishing trust and your credibility. That's the only thing that's going to compel people to believe that you can help them. So every time you have contact with

prospects, ask yourself: Am I selling to these individuals, or are they allowing me to help them?

Here's a good test: Do you hear them saying, "Yes"? Yes, I will share my numbers with you! Yes, I want to let you in on my issues! Yes, I'll tell you what's worrying me! Yes, I will put myself in your hands! If you're not hearing a resounding "yes," or your customer isn't demonstrating behaviors that lead you to believe they're heading in that direction, go back to Start (this is a game, after all). You simply haven't developed the credibility necessary to get your customer into buying mode. They have to be ready to go on this journey with you or you're going to invest a whole lot of time for nothing in return. Start all over and talk with the customer. Are they being open and forthright? Are you trying to understand their current and future states, or are you pitching product? If you're pitching product, prospects will be less willing to let you help them. If the prospect is not being forthright in giving you the information you're asking for, then they are not letting you help them. You have to fix this before you go any further. If you can't get buyers to let you help them, the sale is dead.

You're not going to be invited to help someone until you pull out all the stops with regards to your empathy, authenticity, expertise, and credibility. You have to convince your customers that you understand their world and their pain. They have to believe that you are there for them, not for yourself. Remember, no one gives a shit about you. Concentrate on bringing them value, and even if they don't like you, they'll buy from you.

It's not about pushing features and benefits—that's old-school selling. Gap selling is about establishing trust and revealing all of the knowledge you possess about your customer's space.

So how do you get people to let their guard down, admit they're ready for help, and then allow you to help them?

You put all the concepts we've already discussed into play.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Discovery: Know Your Clients Better Than They Know Themselves

Stop qualifying opportunities using B.A.N.T. Like everything else about gap selling, the gap-selling discovery takes a completely different tack from a traditional discovery. The first big difference you'll notice in this process is that it doesn't lead with B.A.N.T. to determine whether a lead is an opportunity. B.A.N.T. is bunk. To refresh your memory or for those of you who don't know, B.A.N.T. is an acronym for Budget, Authority, Need, and Timing. It's a tactical sales technique taught to salespeople to help them qualify an opportunity. The objective of B.A.N.T. is to keep salespeople from spending time on deals that won't close. The argument is, if there is no budget, if you're not talking to someone with authority, if there is no need for your product and the timing isn't right, then it's not an opportunity. B.A.N.T. is a perfect example of the type of tactical sales training that doesn't understand the game of selling and puts salespeople in a bad position during the sale. B.A.N.T. is outdated. It's self-centered. It's everything I've been telling you not to be.

Tell me this, Salesperson: Why should anyone have to spend one single minute convincing *you* that they are worthy of your time? That they are qualified to buy from you? What a joke! It's completely backward.

Maybe you're thinking that B.A.N.T. is actually in the buyer's best interest because it spares you both if you can determine ahead of time whether they're a good candidate for your product or service. But what you're missing is any understanding of human nature. Let's break it down:

Budget: Traditional qualifying process says make sure buyers have the money before bothering to tempt them with something they can't afford. But I assure you, when prospects see enough value in what you're selling, they'll find the budget. Basing someone's potential to be a customer on their budget assumes the customer knows he has a problem and knows there's a solution available. In many cases, a budget is merely a starting point. Trying to qualify a deal based on a budget before you have identified the depth and breadth of the potential value is foolish, even suicidal. The most you'll pay for a pill that will make your headache go away is \$5... until you find out the headache is caused by a tumor and the pill will make that tumor disappear. You didn't budget that 5 dollars, but now that you know you're gonna die without it, you're spending that 5 dollars in a

heartbeat. To hell with the “budget.” People find the budget for big gaps.

Authority: Unless you’re selling a \$1000-or-less product, there is no such thing as a single decision maker anymore. According to Gartner (formerly CEB Global), as of 2014 there are at least 5.4 decision makers per B2B sale.^{xi} So what if the person you’re talking to isn’t the person who can sign on the dotted line? Whether or not your prospect has the authority to make decisions is immaterial if you make your case for value. If they believe you’re offering value, and they’re not equipped or qualified to continue the discussion, they’ll introduce you to the appropriate person who is. I mean, if we’re hanging out and you tell me that your smart, single, ski-loving sister lives in my city, I might ask you for her number. I’m not talking to her directly, but the potential for something good is there. I’d be a fool not to pursue the lead to see where it goes.

In addition, assuming that a person who isn’t the final decision maker can’t also be an influencer is foolish as well. Today, authority is a committee of influencers, champions, mobilizers, and more. Don’t hang your qualification process on one individual.

Need: You might know the answer to this one by now. Gap sellers don’t sell to need, they sell to problems. Just because customers don’t *think* they need anything doesn’t mean they actually don’t. All you require at this point is a chance to prove that the problem exists; you can demonstrate the need later. It’s your job to highlight a problem, and then help the buyer determine how big or small it is. The best salespeople don’t rely on demand reaction, that is, selling something the customer already knows about, or selling to organizations that already recognize they have a problem. Instead, they leverage demand creation, seeking out the latent opportunities where customers don’t even know they need help until someone comes along and points out how their company is at risk.

Demand creation is what happens when you call a ticketing company to ask if they’ve ever considered consolidating their ticketing and CRM systems into one.

And they say, “Nope.”

And you ask, “*Why not?*”

And they say, “We don’t need to. We send out emails to our customers and they’re aware of all our shows, and our online ticketing system works great.”

And you say, “*That’s great! Hey, let me ask you though...when*

someone buys a ticket, how do you get their name registered in the CRM?"

And they say, "We type it in."

And you ask, "How many new people come to shows every year?"

And they say, "About 25% of our customers are first time buyers."

And you ask, "How many tickets do you sell per year?"

And they say, "About 100,000."

And you ask, "So you're manually entering 25,000 people into your CRM system every year?"

And they say, "Yeah."

And you ask, "And you pay someone to do that?"

And they say, "Yeah."

And you ask, "Well, how does this data entry clerk know she's entering the name of a first-time ticket buyer?"

And they say, "Well, she first does a cross reference with our current database to see if they've come to a show or not. If she doesn't see them in the database, she checks a box on the form, stating they are a first time ticket buyer."

And you ask, "Has she ever forgotten to check the box?"

And they say, "Yes, all the time."

And you ask, "And how do you market to these first-time buyers so they'll come back for another show?"

And they say, "Our marketing person sends out an email thanking them for attending and announcing upcoming events. We also send mailings."

And you say, "What if I told you I could create a system that automatically registered your customers into your CRM every time they bought a ticket, automatically noted that they were first-time buyers, and automatically sent those first-time buyers a thank-you email that offered them a discount on future events to encourage them to come back? Would that change your business at all?"

And they say, "Holy crap. You can do that?"

And you say, “*Maybe we should talk a little more.*”

Gap sellers never take their prospects’ word for granted when it comes to their needs.

Ever.

Timing: Timing will take care of itself. Timing is fluid and can change at a moment’s notice for a number of sales-driven reasons, including how well you sell and position your solution, in-house dynamics, and external factors such as the economy or a move by the competition. But again, just because a prospect doesn’t think now is a good time to buy doesn’t mean they’re right. If you can help them see that every day they don’t fix a problem it is simply compounding it in the form of lost money, lost time, lost efficiency, lost reputation, or lost something-else-important, they will decide *now* is the right time to make the bleeding stop.

Everything B.A.N.T. is designed to find out will be exposed during the discovery process. There’s no reason to use it to qualify your prospect.

B.A.N.T. is quite simply irreconcilable with the whole philosophy of gap selling, because . . .

Sales are not about you!

and

Sales are about your customers and their needs.

If you can get your prospects to let you help them, you’re going to know if you have a qualified opportunity. Now, there are people who will argue that it is nuts to embark on trying to get prospects to let you help them if you haven’t firmly ascertained whether or not they’re qualified ahead of time. They’re right. *I’m not saying you shouldn’t qualify your prospect!*

I’m saying you should do it differently than B.A.N.T or any other approach. I’m saying you should use the discovery strategy outlined in this chapter, which doubles as a foolproof qualifying method because it’s all about the customer, not you.

The Close Happens at the Beginning

Your product or service doesn’t matter right now. For real. Everything you do or say at this stage of the game should be entirely focused on your customers, understanding their current state, and getting to the bottom of what ails them. Every step of the sale is contingent on you getting the right information via the discovery process. How you proceed during this moment will set the stage for success or failure. That’s no exaggeration. The sale is won or lost during the discovery. If you don’t get enough information, miss a few key points, misdiagnose the problem, incorrectly assess the problem, miss the customer’s

desired future state, miscalculate the gap—any of these and more can doom the sale. The sale is won at the beginning, not the end.

Remember that old adage, Always Be Closing? ABC—a vicious Alec Baldwin writes it on a chalkboard in the movie version of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, in the same scene where he barks at sales has-been Jack Lemon to “Put. The coffee. Down . . . Coffee is for closers only.” Yeah, well, that scene is a joke. In real life, closing isn’t a thing. It’s not something you do at the end of the sale. It’s not something you do to a prospect. I’ll say it again: You don’t close prospects. This old idea that good closers are good salespeople is garbage, at least in the traditional sense. Closing skills like the assumptive close, the option close, the urgency close—all these close techniques are a waste of time. They only serve to put you first and aren’t focused on the customer or prospect. To make things worse, they don’t work.

In his blog post titled *Closing Techniques in Sales are Dead—Here’s Why*, Chris Orlob, senior director of product marketing at Gong.io, published the results of an analysis his company did of more than one million sales calls. You know what they found? Closing calls sounded essentially the same whether the seller made the deal or lost it. The discovery calls, however, showed enormous differences, particularly in what they call the “talk-to-listen ratio.” During the discovery calls that led to closed deals, salespeople spent more than half of their time listening while their customers talked. The opposite was true of discovery calls that led to missed deals. In those calls, buyers talked only 28% during the length of the call; the salespeople talked almost 80% of the time! Other data showed that “early in the sales cycle there is a linear relationship between the number of questions you ask and the likelihood of closing a deal.”^{xii} Did you get that? The number of questions you ask early in the sale cycle increases your chance of making the deal. The close happens at the beginning, *not* at the end. Gap selling is all about asking questions to get to current and future states. That can’t be done with just a few questions. Gap sellers will almost always ask more questions than people who use traditional selling techniques. They have to. Gap selling demands it and the data backs it up.

Remember, the key when discovering your prospects’ current state is to keep your line of questioning problem-centric (not product-centric) and to get your buyers to talk as much as possible. Invite your customers to engage with you and talk about their world, not yours. Show them you give a shit. You need them to open the door so you can do your initial exploratory work. They have to be willing to be vulnerable. Get them to open up so they can help you help them.

Know the Problem First, Call Second

As introduced in Chapter 3, your first step to discovering your customers current state will be to draft a Problem Identification Chart that lists all the potential problems you can solve, the various impacts these problems could have on your customers business, and their root causes. You have to complete this crucial preliminary work before you even think about approaching a prospect. You wouldn't set out on a journey into the unknown without a map, or at least a well-charged phone loaded with a good GPS app. This chart will serve as your map as you travel through your customers world. Having identified all the possible problems your potential customers could be struggling with ahead of time, you'll know where to target your questions. Writing this information down before you need it will keep you from asking vague questions and will make sure you steer your customers toward problems you can actually help them solve as you work to understand their current state.

Spending any time on problems you can't solve is a waste of your time. Do you really think that when the founders of companies are noodling around in their rented garage spaces or brainstorming at the bar that they talk about or write down on their blackboards or cocktail napkins the list of the features their products or services should have? Hell, no. They b*tch about the problems they hate, and then they write down how they're going to solve them. You need to have a founder's mindset when you think about why anyone should buy from you. You must be able to fill in the blank at the end of this sentence: "The reason my product or service exists is to ____." Do not pick up the phone or start typing an email to a customer without writing that shit down.

First, make a list of all the potential problems your clients could be facing that you could solve. As an example, I'll share with you a Problem Identification Chart centered on sales consulting. Use this to fill in with your own clients.

PROBLEM	IMPACT TO ORGANIZATION	WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE PROBLEM
LOW CLOSE RATES		
DECLINE IN SALES		
WEAK LEAD GENERATION/ PROSPECTING		

Next, you're going to fill in the Impact column. What potential impact could all of those problems you just listed have on a customer?

PROBLEM	IMPACT TO ORGANIZATION	WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE PROBLEM
LOW CLOSE RATES	High cost of sales, slow revenue growth, fewer customers, less revenue, less profitability, increased pressure on the base, wasted leads, lost opportunities, vulnerable to competition, etc.	
DECLINE IN SALES	Decline in revenue, lower margin dollars, cash flow challenges, inability to invest in product or other areas, layoffs, increase in cost of sales, increased competitive pressures, high turnover, etc.	
WEAK LEAD GENERATION/ PROSPECTING	Slow growth, missing quota, weak pipeline, increased cost of sales, pressure on marketing, infighting with marketing, not enough new logos, heavy dependency on the base, single threaded, increased pressure on close improving close rates etc.	

Finally, you're going to list the root causes of all those problems. Remember, this is the column that is going to allow you to prove your credibility and expertise. As we've established, half of your customers won't even know they have a problem. So right off the bat, if you can point an important one out to them, they'll be impressed and start to consider that maybe they should listen to you. But, say you can not

only identify their problem, but also identify and provide the solution. Now you've got cred. And you've also just positioned yourself—and the product or service you're trying to sell—as an incredibly valuable resource.

PROBLEM	IMPACT TO ORGANIZATION	WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE PROBLEM
LOW CLOSE RATES	High cost of sales, slow revenue growth, fewer customers, less revenue, less profitability, increased pressure on the base, wasted leads, lost opportunities, vulnerable to competition, etc.	Can be caused by weak sales team, lack of training, poor sales enablement, poor deal strategies, poor sales management, real product issues, lack of understanding of target customer, poor marketing, wrong target marketing, etc.
DECLINE IN SALES	Decline in revenue, lower margin dollars, cash flow challenges, inability to invest in product or other areas, layoffs, increase in cost of sales, increased competitive pressures, high turnover, etc.	Can be caused by poor sales management, lack of training, wrong product, wrong sales team with wrong sales skills, shift in the market, lack of process, poor forecasting, misaligned incentives and broken commission structure, weak culture, lack of planning, etc.
WEAK LEAD GENERATION/ PROSPECTING	Slow growth, missing quota, weak pipeline, increased cost of sales, pressure on marketing, infighting with marketing, not enough new logos, heavy dependency on the base, single threaded, increased pressure on close improving close rates etc.	Is the result of weak sales team, inability of team to diagnose the problem, lack of understanding of solution set and customer environments, poor marketing, no marketing, lack of understanding of the market place, weak value proposition, wrong sales team structure (farming and hunting at same time), compensation misalignment, etc.

Don't think you have to wait until you're in the thick of a discovery Q&A to start building a sense of trust and proving that you know as much about their industry as your customers do, if not more. Complete a Problem Identification Chart, and you will have already started to lay the groundwork ahead of time.

Now you're ready to start your discovery. Throughout it, you're going to be asking several types of questions:

Probing: These are open-ended questions that press for specific details

Process: These are open-ended questions that ask "How?"

Provoking: These are open-ended questions that gently push customers to consider their current state from a new perspective

Validating: Not open-ended questions! Instead, these simply allow you to repeat information you gather back to your customer to make sure you've correctly understood everything they've told you.

1. Discover the Facts

You'll start by asking as many **probing questions** as possible, and as you note the answers, you'll continue to press for all the details your prospects won't likely think to offer up on their own. Your goal at this initial stage is to record all the literal, physical facts about the business and your customer. If your buyer is an executive director for a theater and you sell ticketing software, your discovery questioning might go something like this:

How many events do you put on? How many theaters do you cover? How many seats does each venue have? How many in total? What's the average number of tickets you process in a year? How many membership packages do you handle? What's the average nonprofit donation? How many people do you have working in marketing and the box office? Can you tell the difference between first-time ticket buyers and loyal patrons? Are ticket sales growing or decreasing? Do you sell out all of your shows? What's your show attendance rate? What's the average patron look like? What's their demographic?

The number of potential questions you can ask is infinite.

Now that's the type of information you want, but you're not going to ask questions like that unless you want to sound like a CIA operative. No one likes to get the third degree. Instead, you're going to use what sales influencer and author Deb Calvert calls "command statement starter words":

"Tell me a little bit about the events you put on."

"Help me understand . . . "

"Please describe . . . ?"

"Walk me through . . . ?"

So rather than ask, "How do you market to your buyers?" you can say, "Walk me through how you market to first-time ticket buyers?" Or, "Help me understand your ticket buyer demographic and how you capture it?" By asking questions in this manner, you're inviting much deeper and complex discussions that won't feel like interrogations.

Keep this in mind as we go through all the questioning techniques ahead. Every time you delve for information, it should feel like a friendly conversation. These formulations will help you avoid making your customers feel like you're badgering them, and instead give them a sense of control. Deb Calvert's book *Discover Questions Get You Connected* is a great resource.

Beyond probing questions, you want to ask **process questions** which try to get information on how your customers do what they do. For example, if you were to engage with a non-profit performing arts theater that puts on plays and dance recitals, you might say (using command statement starter words, of course):

"Tell me about your ticket-selling process." "Share your process for marketing to current patrons." "Explain your process to identify your biggest donors and your smallest donors." "Help me understand your reporting process."

Keep in mind, process questions are not just about the high-level answers, but the specific steps in how they do it. For example, if you asked a prospect to explain how they market to first-time ticket buyers, they may say they send them an email after the show, and then follow up with a flyer via snail mail. That's good information, but it's not at the process layer. The process layer explains the tactical details, like this:

"We manually take the names from an Excel spreadsheet and Martin loads them into an online email application. From there we check the box "first-time ticket buyer" and then send them an email. We then print the names out and Jennifer hand-labels a brochure to each new ticket buyer. Next we . . ."

Notice the depth here. If your product makes this process easier, you should be salivating right now. Without asking these types of process questions, we can't learn how and where you can bring value. Asking process questions takes the discovery process to an entirely different level of insight.

2. Discover the Problems

After you've gathered all the facts of the current state and you completely understand what's going on in your prospect's organization, the problems should start to reveal themselves.

For instance, your customer has revealed that her company is spread out over four regions, each one run by a general manager. Upon learning that fact, you could ask how she gathers all the data from each region into one place:

“We can’t. At least not consistently.” There you have it. Problem #1. Now keep asking questions, because it only gets better from here.

“So how do you create consistency within the sales team? How do you get a bird’s-eye view of how the team is performing?”

“We can’t do that, either.” Problem #2.

“Are you concerned about being able to hit that \$110M goal you have when you don’t have a system that allows you to create an environment that ensures all your teams are executing at the same level?”

“Yep.”

That’s a big one: Problem #3. Keep going.

“You said you have varying levels of experience across your sales team. How does that affect your ability to make quota?”

“Sometimes we don’t.” Problem #4.

“How does it affect your ability to be predictable?”

“We’re terribly unpredictable.” Problem #5.

“If you’re unpredictable, how do you plan?”

“It’s really hard.” Problem #6.

Ooh, look at all these problems this head of sales is facing! A salesperson who could fix these problems should be chomping at the bit right now.

At its best, this line of questioning can lead you to point out a problem that your customers might not have even realized they had. For example, let’s say you’re interviewing a perennially losing high school football coach, and through your examination, you find out that he is dealing with several problems: #1, the kids on his team are slow, overweight, and small; #2, this is his first year coaching football after having coached swim teams; #3, a lot of kids get hurt; #4, his team loses a lot of games. All of that is excellent information to have. But then you realize you’ve forgotten to ask for a basic fact:

“How many players are on your team?”

“Twelve.”

Using that information as a guide, it wouldn’t take long to find out

Problem #5, which is that not only does the coach lose games, he often has to forfeit because when two kids get hurt—and the kids on his team often get hurt—he no longer has the minimum number of players required to continue the game. What else does the number of kids on the team tell you? Problem #6, the coach is struggling to recruit. Then you might ask a final question:

“How many athletes choose not to attend your school because the football team is so bad?”

That’s not something the coach might have ever thought about, so he checks school enrollment and discovers that it’s down. And in the comments section of the forms where people can cite their reasons for choosing to attend or not attend the school, he sees Problem #7: A number of students indicated that their decision was influenced by the sorry state of the athletics department. See how discovery can uncover so many problems, problems even the coach or the buyer didn’t see?

During your discovery process, pay attention and look for holes that suggest potentially weak business processes and missed opportunities so that later, you’ll be able to suggest some alternative, better options. Understanding their business backward and forward is what will eventually allow you to show how your expertise in their field, and your experience with other customers, differentiates you from any other salesperson they could turn to for help.

Take note, because 99% of the time, it’s your product’s ability to improve upon that process that will reveal the product’s competitive value. Understanding your customers’ processes will also prove incredibly helpful when you run into customer objections, which we’ll cover in detail in Chapter 12.

Banish Open-Ended Answers

Something that is too often overlooked in traditional sales training is how to press your customer or prospect to be specific. Open-ended answers are unacceptable. Open-ended answers are unquantified answers. Vague answers. Answers that leave you guessing. “We’re not growing fast enough,” is simply not sufficient information for you to work with when you’re gap selling. It’s too open to interpretation. What is “fast enough?” Your idea of “fast enough” and your prospects’ may be totally different. Train yourself so that every time you hear a lazy, vague, open-ended answer like, “We need to hire more people,” or “I want to increase revenue,” you stop the conversation and ask the prospect to articulate exactly what they mean. You’ll probably need to help them along, maybe like this:

Buyer: We’re not growing fast enough.

You: Define that for me? What does “fast enough” mean to you?

Buyer: We’re only growing by 22%. We need to be hitting 25%.

Ah-ha! Now you’ve quantified the problem. “Enough” is not enough. In this case “enough” is 3% more. You have to get people to be specific, because open-ended answers don’t tell you enough about the problem to help you devise a solution.

Every question you ask will give you more data that offers another chance to extrapolate the potential negative consequences that will impact your customers’ environment if things don’t change. Every answer will deepen your understanding of the current state.

Don’t Just Find Problems—Hunt Them Down

If you prepare for your discovery with a PIC, you’ll already know what problems your customer is likely facing before you write your email or pick up the phone. Maybe it’s poor lead generation, or low conversion rates, or long sales cycles. Here’s an easy one: more lost sales than they would like. In your initial communications when you’re establishing a connection with your customer through emails and voicemails, take a moment to describe these potential problems and ask permission to give your customers some ideas as to how you might be able to resolve them. If they agree to continue the conversation, you’ll know right off the bat that you’ve hit a nerve.

For example, let’s imagine you want to engage with the hotel manager we used as an example in Chapter 4. Because of your preparatory work listing the problems, impacts, and root causes likely affecting your customers’ current state, you already know ahead of time which hotel management issues you can solve. Let’s say you chose low hotel occupancy as the problem most likely to apply to this particular buyer. Lead with that. If you are correct and it is in fact an issue your customer is dealing with, your customer will be eager to talk.

Now, as you engage the manager and build credibility, he invites you to dig deeper, which gives you a chance to learn he has additional problems such as difficulty attracting conference bookings, making revenue, pleasing corporate, holding employee retention steady, and keeping up customer service standards. You see that you’re going to be able to fix almost all of those problems, too. Sweet! But hold your horses. Even if you’re pretty sure you’ve got the answer to your buyer’s dreams in your hands, now is not the time for the big reveal. Instead, you’ll want to continue building that trust and taking every opportunity to show the depth of your knowledge about your customer’s business. Patience is key. Don’t rush to the sell. There will

be plenty of time to sell. Go deeper.

3. Discover the Impact

Next, still without passing any judgment, you will want to continue asking probing and process questions to ascertain your customers' current state and find out how the problems you've identified are affecting their business. You'll also want to follow up with plenty of **provoking questions** that will help your customers look beyond the obvious, to think deeper about the problem, or get unstuck from their routine. Provoking questions aren't just meant to challenge the buyer, but rather get them to think about their problems in new ways. Some provoking questions you could try:

What happens when you...?

Has there ever been a time when...?

If you did X, what do you think would happen?

These questions are designed to challenge your customers to evaluate not just what is happening, but why it's happening. In this way, you're provoking buyers into thinking through a situation that may not be an issue yet, but could become part of their future state. And rather than risk having them feel like you're shoving their nose in their ignorance, you've done it in a way that allows them to feel like they discovered the root cause on their own, which means they'll be more inclined to fix it.

Guiding your customers to take note of the impact that various problems are having on their business isn't just another fact-finding expedition—it's going to force them to recognize the level of urgency with which they need to treat these problems. That's super important because you can point out all the problems you want, but until customers actually see how their business is being negatively affected, it will be easy for them to push the problems off to the side to deal with them later. Out of sight, out of mind, like a benign tumor that poses no threat to one's health. If you want buyers to agree to purchase your solutions now, you must open their eyes to the malignancy. That is, you have to reveal the damage the problems are causing them today, and the grave consequences that will follow if they aren't excised soon.

No one takes well to scare tactics, so you're not going to tell your customers any bad news. Instead, you're going to let them figure out the damage for themselves. Again, you're going to use command statement starter words:

"Tell me how this issue is affecting you." "Describe the impact it's

having on your department?” “What are the consequences every time this problem occurs?”

Let's say that during your conversation with the head of a ticket sales company, you uncover that they're having trouble regularly communicating with patrons. You should follow up:

“Share with me what's been the impact of not being able to regularly communicate with patrons?”

Your buyer replies, “Sure. Our revenue is down by a lot.”

Hold it!

That is a classic open-ended answer, and as we've already discussed, there are no open-ended answers allowed in gap selling. So what do you do? You ask a clarifying question.

“Hm. What is ‘a lot’ to you?”

“Well, two years ago we were at \$4M. This year we're barely going to clear \$3.5M.”

There you have it. The problem is lack of communication with patrons, and the impact of that problem is a half-million dollars in lost revenue. That's a problem someone is going to want to fix.

Business Problems and Technical Problems

When it comes to problems, there are two types: technical problems and business problems. Technical problems are related to the technology or underlying processes that drive the business and assist in its operation. Technical problems prevent the business from operating efficiently:

A database that doesn't share enough information. An antiquated inventory management system. Ineffective reporting systems. These issues are technical problems. The impact of the technical problem(s) on the business is the business's problem. A database that doesn't share enough information (technical problem) forces the company to hire extra people to manually run reports every month, costing them an additional \$20K a month. That's a business problem. An antiquated management system that poorly tracks inventory in different locations (technical problem) causes the company millions of dollars per year in wasted inventory and \$3 million a year in lost revenue from not having the right products in stock. Those are business problems.

The thing is, most salespeople focus on solving the technical problems when it's the business problems that create a customer's unique buying motivations and lead to the biggest gaps. Your

customer might reveal he has disparate systems that make it hard to share information across the organization (technical problem). Your software is known for its ability to share information seamlessly across the organization, so it follows that most of your prospects have this technical problem. The technical problem isn't going to drive the sale; it's the conversation starter. The business problem is what is going to drive the sale, so you need to understand it and how it uniquely presents itself within your buyer's company. No two prospects will *ever* have the same business problem. It's impossible. Your prospects can have the same technical problem(s), but never, ever, the same business problems.

Imagine you were selling a public safety software to a city's police department. A likely technical problem would be unreliable and incomplete communications between various chains of command. Yet, by asking the right probing and process questions in the right order, you could also discover that serious business problems resulting from the lack of communication are currently affecting not only the police force, but also the city at large—problems such as increased gang violence and a decreased conviction rate. The technical problem of not being able to communicate across various chains of command is inconvenient and frustrating; the severity of the business problem—increased gang violence and decreased conviction rates—is massive, and that is what will drive the sale.

The business problem provides the motivation for change. You're looking for the “holy shit” of outcomes. It's not the tumor that motivates people to do whatever it takes to get cured. A benign tumor is annoying, possibly painful, certainly disconcerting. A malignant tumor, though? Most people would do whatever it took to get cured, because the impact—the business problem—could be fatal. And for many, it wouldn't be the disease that represented the worst problem, but the outcome of never seeing their spouse again, or never meeting their grandchildren. Your discovery process needs to open the door to that kind of OMG realization for your customers. Done right, it should lead you to uncover the big, unappreciated gap lying between their current state and desired future state. That's how you'll make the sale.

4. Discover the root cause

Your customers' problems didn't just materialize out of nothing. Now that you know what the problems are and you know the impact they are having on your customer, you need to make sure you and your buyer fully understand why they occur—their root cause. Often these will be technical problems, but not always. When you press your buyer to explain why his team is having difficulty connecting with donors, he might say that it's harder and harder to find someone

willing to pick up the phone. And that could be true. But just in case there's more to the story, continue to use provoking questions. These are great for helping customers expand their purview. You could ask:

“Why do you think this problem is happening?” “How do you think your current processes are affecting this?” “How has the implementation of this product affected your business?”

You always want to provoke your customers to think hard and differently about what's gone wrong.

Back to our floundering theater company. You found one problem—the theater company isn't raising enough donations through patrons because their outreach technology is ridiculously outdated and limited. You don't stop there, though, because you want to flush out every problem you can solve. You keep digging, and you discover that on top of that initial problem, the company doesn't have a system that can tell them who their first-time buyers and their repeat customers are, and therefore there's no way to market to them. That should prompt provoking questions, which might go like this: “What if you could see which customers were first-timers and which ones were repeat attendees? What would happen to your business if you could get your first-time customers to return two or three times per year?”

The technical problem: Unsophisticated reporting system

Business problem: Can't market to people to increase repeat visits

Existential problem: The company isn't growing and could fold

Root cause: Disparate systems that require manual input and don't automatically communicate back with customers once they make a purchase

You see what I mean about needing to know your customers' businesses inside and out? Provoking questions allow you to identify new opportunities, develop the conversation, and position you as an expert. That recognition of your expertise is crucial. If you can confidently identify a problem, show a buyer that you understand the impact it's having on the business, intelligently articulate the root cause of the problem in industry terms, and offer yourself as someone who can create a perfectly tailored solution to that problem, you're golden. When you have a deep understanding of their world and the most up-to-date knowledge, you can reveal new options they might not have known existed.

While you're going through this discovery process, don't forget to pepper your conversation with plenty of **validating questions**.

Validation is a common communication strategy promoted by psychologists to strengthen personal relationships. You could say you're using these validation questions to help strengthen your relationship with your customer by ensuring that they agree with the way you are interpreting their responses. They also keep you from making incorrect assessments about their problems. A validating question might be something like, *"What I hear you saying is that you could raise a lot more revenue if you had a pool of more people to sell tickets to."* (Other validating questions could be, *"Am I understanding you correctly?"* or *"Did I get this right?"*) Asking a question in this way reassures your buyers that you understand their problems and their pain, and it gives them a chance to make corrections if you're at all off. In this way, you're both certain to be traveling along the same path, and you are more likely to agree on what the solution to this problem should be. Too often, salespeople leave meetings or discussions and find out later that they misunderstood what the buyer meant. Validating questions ensure you and the buyer are on the same page and that what you heard is what they meant. Always use validating questions throughout every sales call to confirm you're on the same page and before shifting to a new topic.

Conducting the Conversation

Until now, I've focused on choosing the right types of discovery questions. But while choice of words is supremely important, equally important to any communication is how and when you choose to talk. Consciously choosing how to modulate your voice, when to speak, and when to stay silent will matter just as much as the words you select. For this reason, I want you to pay close attention to two other ingredients necessary to a killer discovery:

1. Tone

Tone is fundamental to good human communication. The right tone is not only critical for getting people to trust you enough to give you the information you want to know, but also for getting them to hear you in the first place. Imagine you're sitting at your desk and your boss pokes her head in, saying, "Hey, I thought your presentation this morning was great."

And you reply, *"Really?"*

Or maybe you reply, *"Really?"*

Or perhaps you go with, *"Really?"*

Same word, toooooootally different tones, which means toooooootally

different meanings. The first one, delivered with puppy-dog eagerness and a slight squeak at the end, expresses delight at the compliment. The second one starts and stops in the exact same vocal registry, indicating total surprise that your boss was happy with your work. The third, said with a kind of snarky question mark at the end, says without saying, “That’s all you got?”

I would not recommend using the third tone when replying to your boss.

I’m not cautioning you about tone because I think you’re going to be a complete jerk to your customers. Most of the time, I expect you will do your best to keep your tone friendly, warm, and engaging during the discovery. Things can get tricky, however, when you are forced to ask tough, sensitive questions. If your customer is responsible for creating and implementing the system that is clearly the root cause of the entire company’s struggles, you’re going to have to proceed extremely delicately. Even a confident tone could sink you. This situation would require a tone of humility, openness, and deference. Not everyone is good at that.

Hitting the right tone in the right circumstance is an art. If you do happen to find yourself frequently stumbling, it’s probably because you’re not in tune with your buyer’s emotions. Improve your empathy, and you’ll find it easier to hit the right notes that your customer needs to hear.

2. Timing

Timing matters. Just because you can ask a question, it doesn’t mean you should. Remember, the point of the discovery exercise isn’t to ask questions but to get information. Therefore, if you ask a question and your buyer is unwilling to answer it or provides you with a shallow, weak answer, you lose. You wasted a question. To sell better, you have to plot out your questions.

If you want to get better at selling, you gotta get better at asking questions. Learn to create a rhythm and flow in your questioning that takes your buyer on a journey. Ask the right type of question at the right time in the right tone, and you will be amazed at what you can discover about your customer. Once you get good at it, your destiny will be filled with informational gold.

Getting an in-depth understanding of your customers’ current state through a robust discovery process is the only thing that will allow you to open their eyes to opportunities they didn’t know existed and allow you to effectively sell to them.

The Opportunity: Qualified or Not?

When you are done with these four discovery steps—you understand

the facts of your customers' business, you've identified their problems, assessed the impact those problems are having on the business, and pinpointed the root cause of the problems—you'll have qualified the opportunity. You'll know it's qualified because if you've done the discovery correctly, you'll easily be able to answer "yes" to these four simple questions:

1. Does the prospect have a problem you can fix?
2. Does the prospect agree they have a problem?
3. Does the prospect want to fix the problem?
4. Will the prospect go on a journey with you to fix the problem?

Answer those questions in the affirmative and you have a qualified opportunity.

Does the gap-selling discovery take longer than B.A.N.T.? Maybe a little. But when you're done, you'll find yourself in a far stronger position, and far closer to closing the deal than B.A.N.T. will ever get you at this stage in the game. Don't worry about the budget, need, authority or timing. That stuff will take care of itself throughout the sales process.

Future State: Where Does Your Buyer Want to Go?

Get ready for a little bit of déjà-vu.

While you're digging to see the foundations of your customers' current state, you're also going to be concentrating on discovering your customers' desired future state—that wonderful place that will come into existence once they've solved all the problems that currently ail them. You do this by asking questions. If your customer is a theater company, you could ask:

"How would you like this system to work?"

"How much time do you wish it would take?"

"How many more tickets would you like to sell?"

"How many more leads would you like to generate?"

"How much less time would you like your employees to spend on this particular issue?"

"How much more revenue would this represent?"

All of these questions are dedicated to quantifying where your

customer wants to go. You want to find the literal, physical future state your customer envisions by asking open-ended questions and refusing to accept open-ended answers. Then you're going to want to find out how that future state would impact their business, pressing to make sure they can articulate the details. "Better efficiency," is not a specific impact; "reducing turnaround by 20% and increasing production by 50%" is.

You should never be satisfied with the first answer you get. Without digging further and asking for clarification, there will be no way you'll be able to find out that a customer's headache is really being caused by a tumor, not by a lack of caffeine. This means that your customer's future state isn't just a place where the headache is gone, but a place where he lives to see his kids grow up, and to have grandkids, and retire by the beach, and everything else that goes with enjoying the rest of a long, successful, fulfilling life. Try to solve the wrong problem, and you could wind up leaving the customer to believe his problem isn't that big of a deal.

It's all about envisioning outcomes. If every problem on your customer's list were to disappear and you could implement perfect solutions, what would be the impact? Help place them in that frame of mind and imagine what that kind of world would look and feel like to them—emphasizing that you've got the goods to make it a reality. You have to get your customers to buy into you. They'll appreciate your insights, your ideas for improvement, and your solutions to their problems, but as the philosopher David Hume said, "Reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will."^{xiii} Unless your customers feel strongly about the value of the change you're proposing, they will not move closer to the sale.

At the beginning of this book, I assured you that you were not selling a product or service. I'm going to reiterate that point again. If you're incapable of defining the outcome your customer wants, you're stuck selling them your service, like consulting, or your product, such as SaaS application software, or dating software. But once you know the future state, you're no longer selling a mere product or service; you're selling a desired outcome. You're selling your customer's ability to reach a larger audience and increase the revenue of her organization within six months instead of two years. You're selling the ability for customers to accelerate the growth of their organizations, stop losing money, retain clients, and become more profitable. You're selling change. Positive, exciting, and desired change.

Have Patience

If it sounds as though discovering your customers' current and future states is a bit time consuming, you're right. You'll want to gather as

much of this information as possible during the initial phone call or meeting, but it'll probably take more than just one interaction to get a good understanding of their current and future states. People are busy, time is precious, and you may not have the luxury of obtaining all of this data in one go. Plus, buyers won't always know all the answers and may need time to think about the questions you're asking. Getting a complete view of the current and future state isn't a static exercise; it can happen over time through various interactions. The key is to get as much as you can during discovery and in the early stages of the sales process, and then be on the lookout for more information as the sale progresses. Keep track of the information after each meeting. Use your CRM—it's going to be your best friend. No matter how good you think your memory is, if you're doing a proper gap-selling discovery, you'll never be able to recall all the data you collect. Document it in your CRM.

Remember, you're never truly done with discovery. As time goes on, your customer may bring other buyers into the game and when that happens, you'll have to engage in this process all over again. Trust me, you don't want to assume that a new buyer's current state and future state match the current and future state of your initial buyer. I learned that the hard way a few years back.

I had conducted a rigorous discovery with a director of sales for a change management training company. The buyer was extremely clear about her current state: The company wasn't meeting its growth rate goal, her team hadn't been able to hire the people they needed, she wanted to find a better way to move clients from trials to investing in full-blown campaigns, their average deal size was way too low, and she wanted to be able to land more large, high-value enterprise accounts. Based on that information, I had parroted back to her what I heard (the current state), what I thought the problems were (the problems), how they were affecting her organization (the impact), and why I believed she was having the problems (root cause). I then moved on to making suggestions about how I could solve her problems. She was thrilled. So thrilled, she asked me to share what we'd discussed together with her peer, another director of sales from a different group.

Operating from the assumption that these peers from the same company, in the same role, would be experiencing the same issues and therefore have the same current state and desired future state, I confidently laid out my solutions. And *Bam!* The new buyer wasn't having it. Nothing I said resonated. I could feel the disconnect. I started to get confused. I got none of the positive feedback, confidence, and excitement I had gotten during my earlier conversation with her peer. The new director was asking me questions

that had nothing to do with the issues initially discussed in the first meeting. This new director didn't see things the way her peer did *at all*. For every solution I offered, she pointed out a hole I hadn't filled. Her current state didn't look anything like the first buyer's, and she envisioned a completely different future state. In her mind, my solution wasn't a good fit for the company, and therefore, I lost credibility. When the first buyer told me to put everything on hold so she could talk things through with her colleague, I knew I'd lost the sale. It was brutal. I broke a cardinal rule: Never assume you know what your buyers are experiencing and what they want to achieve. In the end, I lost the sale and they stuck with the status quo which was unfortunate, because it was clearly not working for either of them.

Check Your Work With the CRM Challenge

I think it's become pretty clear to you by now that gap selling demands you get far more information from customers than salespeople traditionally ask for. Therefore, keeping track of all this information, from your buyer's physical and literal current state, to their unique problems, to the impact of those problems and more can be overwhelming if you don't take copious notes and store them in your CRM. To help make sure you've done this process correctly and have successfully clarified your customers' business problems, I've created the CRM Challenge, a foolproof way to ensure you've gotten the information you need, and to make sure that info is robust enough to assist you in selling to the gap.

Using a CRM isn't a new idea, but most salespeople don't go deep enough with it, entering only high-level information into the CRM, if they enter anything at all. For example, typical entries might be, "Customer is unhappy with the current product," or, "Customer wants to grow more," or, "Customer is losing to the competition." Could you get any more nondescript? If these were your customers and I read these entries aloud without telling you which opportunity I was reading from, would you be able to identify them? For most of you the answer is No, and that's a problem. The CRM Challenge is all about making sure you gather and document so much identifiable information about your buyers' problems that your discovery notes would make it crystal-clear which opportunity it was without you ever having to look at identifying data, or even the industry.

Can You Pass the CRM Challenge?

Get your sales manager or one of your sales peers to go into your pipeline and randomly pick an opportunity you're working on. Without sharing the name of the account, the buyer, or any other identifying information, ask them to read you the notes. Can you tell

them which opportunity it refers to? Can you do that for all of your opportunities? If you cannot pass this test, you don't know enough to be gap selling and you've made your job a lot harder. Now you're in a bind. Your customers are moving forward on the sale, but now you're going to have to go back and get all of those important details out of them to make sure you know what's behind the sale, why they want to buy and their intrinsic motivation, thus slowing down the momentum of the sales process. It will be awkward but necessary because if you don't know what's important to your buyer, how will you close the deal? How are you going to get the customer to recognize your solution is the right solution? Without going back for that information, you won't. If you fail the CRM Challenge, it's a tell-tale sign you're selling your product, not selling to the desired outcome.

The CRM Challenge ensures that you're doing your discovery right and that you're getting all the information you need to properly move the deal through the sales process. If you've asked your questions correctly, the data you collect on the opportunity will be unique; there will be only one possibility of who it could be. No one company has the same problem or impact. "Not growing fast enough" means something different for everyone. The truth is, most people only conduct a discovery at very high levels, so by the time they're done, they don't really know their customer. They don't get enough of the current state and can't define it accurately enough to be able to come up with a custom solution. A gap-selling discovery ensures you can.

I'm often asked for a list of sure-fire questions people can ask to nail the discovery and get the right information out of their customers. The truth is, I can't give you one. I can explain the purpose of probing, process, provoking, and validating questions, but there is no gap-selling discovery script. Every seller is different and every situation is different. The thing to keep in mind as you're learning to do a good discovery, however, is that your goal is not to ask specific questions. It's to get specific information. For the purpose of this book, I've had to outline the steps of discovery in a linear fashion, yet in the real world it is anything but a linear process. You sure as hell don't want to sound like you're going through a checklist as you speak to your customer. This is a conversation. Let me say that again: you're having a conversation, not an interrogation, and like all conversations, it's going to move forward and back and around, and many times your questions and answers will overlap. That's OK. You're not always going to get the information in a nice, neat order. The key is to ask, then listen, then ask, listen, ask, listen.

When you get this part right, your customers will work with you because they believe it will benefit them to give you all the information they can, and that's exactly where you want them. You

should never be dragging anyone through a sale. Your buyer should be your partner. A gap-selling discovery process completely alters the traditional selling relationship. It used to be almost adversarial; you versus the customer. The gap-selling relationship is collaborative. The beauty of this is that there is never any reason for you to pressure a customer to buy anything, because by the time you're done with discovery, they'll be so aware of their problems, they'll be begging for your help.

CHAPTER NINE

Is The Gap Worth It?

Once you know your customers' current state and future state, do the math.

Future State – Current State = The Gap

This is where you'll see why it's crucial to get specific details from your customers.

The customer wants 20% growth. She's at 10% growth.

The gap is 10% and

\$110M in revenue – \$100M in revenue = a \$10M gap and

Close rate of 35% – Close rate of 30% = a 5% gap and

Average deal size of \$65,000 – \$50,000 = a \$15,000 gap

You see? You're not selling a sales package consulting service; you're selling \$10M in additional revenue! You're not selling a shorter sales cycle; you're selling whatever a 5% increase in closing rates means to your customer.

Once you understand what you're selling, all you have to ask yourself is, "Is this gap big enough to warrant what it's going to cost my customer to change and get them to reach their desired future state?" You're making sure that the value of the outcome is worth shifting from where they are today to where they want to be tomorrow.

Well, would you pay \$100K for an extra \$10M? (The gap: \$9.9M)

Damn straight you would, and in most cases so will your buyers.

Would you pay \$100K for an extra \$1M? (The gap: \$900K)

That's not so clear-cut. The gap is not as big. Additional costs, the time to implement and process changes, one's comfort with the status quo, uncertainty that the new product can deliver, politics, or any number of issues can make a \$900K gap not seem big enough to be worth changing what they're doing.

And you know what? If it isn't, that's good to know, too. Look to widen the gap. Can you do more discovery? Can you ask more questions to uncover an additional impact of changing? It's often possible to widen the gap, and you should look for every opportunity to do so, but if you can't, that's a sign you need to get out and tell the

customer you don't think you're the right person to solve their problems. Often customers will figure it out on their own, but ideally, you will recognize the incompatibility before they will. With all the data you've collected, all your insight and knowledge of their desired outcomes, you should have a solid understanding of whether or not your solution will work for your customer. If you see that it won't, cut to the chase. Tell them you've concluded that there are better options for them, and then do everything you can to connect them to someone who really can help. Don't try to push through the sale when you know it's not the right solution for your customer. Don't waste time on a deal that probably won't close when you could be focusing your attention and efforts on deals that will.

Once you've done all the work of gathering your information, selling to the existing gap is a no-brainer. The problem with a lot of salespeople, however, is that all that preliminary work seems like too much. They want to close the deal fast and go right to closing questions. This doesn't work and gets you ahead of the buyer. I have done hundreds of discovery roleplays with salespeople, and inevitably they rush to the close. They ask a few high-level questions about the prospect's environment, the buyer's current product or solution for their problem, and then *boom!* They're on to closing questions, like, "If we could solve those problems, would you buy?" It's fascinating how we salespeople have been trained to hurry up and get to the close. Don't be. Have patience. Go slower. Focus on gathering as much information as you can about the world your buyer is struggling with and why they want to change. Remember, change is what this whole game is about.

Good salespeople are patient—they don't just have the patience for the work; they embrace it. They understand that the success or failure of the sale is deeply rooted in getting as much information as possible so they can clearly identify the gap. Great selling takes a maniacal commitment to doing the work and doing it well.

Do the work, pay attention to the details, and focus on the customer's needs rather than your own. Drill deep enough so that you know enough about your customer's organization that you can confidently and credibly offer near-irrefutable advice, insight, and direction. That is the most reliable formula for sales success. If your clients would consider hiring you as a consultant for their business because you know so much about what they do, how they do it, and what impacts their outcomes, you'll know you've perfected your technique.

CHAPTER TEN

Know Your Customers' Why

Manny checked his reflection in the mirror as he passed it on his way out the front door, and was pleased. He had not only remembered to pick up his tuxedo from the dry cleaner's, but it still fit even though the last time he'd worn it was eight years ago at his youngest son's wedding. He couldn't lie—he still missed the nightly ice cream sandwiches and weekly six-pack his wife had forced him to give up about six months earlier, but his deprivation was having an undeniably positive impact on his belly. Locking up behind him and heading toward his brand new Range Rover parked in the driveway, he grudgingly made a mental note to thank her for not giving up on him.

He slid into the driver's seat of his car and pulled away from the house, checking the fuel gauge to make sure he had enough in the tank to get him to D.C. where his wife was waiting to join him. Tonight was the biggest night of his life. Tonight, they were having dinner with the president of the United States. He still couldn't quite believe it. He hadn't started his business in the aftermath of the Great Recession with an eye toward riches or accolades, but because he found the work important and fulfilling. Yet in the years since, several of the innovations produced by his company had become indispensable to societies across the globe. He wasn't a household name but his products were, as was his charitable foundation. And now he and his wife were about to have dinner at the White House. Not bad for a guy whose high school class voted him "Most Likely to Join the Circus."

He was about a third of the way into his trip when he heard a loud pop and felt the car lurch. Firmly gripping the steering wheel with both hands, he fought the urge to slam the brakes and instead let the car slow down as it veered to the gravelly shoulder of the road and rolled a few more yards before finally settling in a shallow roadside ditch.

After taking a few minutes to catch his breath and count his blessings, Manny stepped out of the car. Walking around the front, Manny saw that his left tire was blown out, the dirty silver rim of the wheel kissing the oily wet cement still dark from the recent rain. Cursing, Manny started pacing maniacally, clutching his thinning hair. He had what he needed to fix the tire, but there was no way to do the job without getting filthy. Even if he took off his shirt, his pants would be ruined. He couldn't show up at a White House dinner like that! His tuxedo suddenly felt like a straightjacket, and he yanked the jacket

off, stopping himself only at the last second from slamming it into the wet ground and stomping on it in frustration. Grabbing his phone from his pocket, he quickly pulled up his rideshare app, willing it to respond faster to his vicious jabs. His heart sank. Every car was at least 30 miles away. He'd never make it in time.

Then, like a vision in a dream, a tow truck appeared out of the dark. Manny raced dangerously close to the edge of the road, frantically waving both hands over his head like a man drowning. With a squeal, the tow truck pulled over and came to a stop. A bearded, heavy-set man wearing a baseball cap clambered out of the driver's side and approached Manny, who was staring at him wide-eyed with his tux jacket loosely dangling from his hand dangerously close to the dirt, too shocked at the miracle to speak.

"Stuck?" The driver asked.

Manny nodded and finally found his voice. "Can you help me? I'm supposed to have dinner with the president tonight. I mean it. The president! Of America! In like, 40 minutes. This is the biggest night of my life. I can't miss it because of a blown tire. The rideshare company is useless; all the cars are too far away. I can't leave my car on the side of the road. Could you take me? Please? You're my last chance."

"Aw, man, that's rough," said the driver. He had a kind face. He looked over at the Range Rover, then back at Manny. "Yeah, I can get you there."

Manny's sigh of relief almost blew the driver's cap off his head.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God."

"It'll cost you a thousand, though."

Manny did a double take. "I'm sorry, what?"

"A thousand. That'll be a thousand dollars. For the tow and the ride."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I'm sorry, but no."

"But that's outrageous!"

"I understand why you'd feel that way, but I'm on my way to another call. Factor in the lost income and the extra time it will take me to get you to the city, plus the repair, and that's what it will cost for me to get your car off this road and take you to your dinner."

Manny leaned his head back to look up at the dark cloudy sky, knowing that every second he hesitated made it less likely he'd get where he needed to go on time. The air smelled heavy and wet. More rain was coming.

He snapped his head down to look at the driver, and then, jutting his chin at the tow truck, he asked, "How fast can you go in that thing?"

The Value of a Desired Outcome

Under normal circumstances, in Manny's world a tow truck was a tow truck, and at any other time if he had found himself stuck on the side of the road, he'd probably have held out for the cheapest offer that would get his car off the road and get him home safely. Even more likely, he'd have just changed the tire himself, because that's all that was driving his desired outcome—the need to get himself and his car home safely. If it took twenty minutes, great! If it took longer, no big deal. And there's the rub: If there's anything about the sale that's no big deal, the salesperson (in this case, a tow truck driver) is dealing with a small gap, which means anyone else can fill it.

But on this day, with the President of the United States, not to mention Manny's wife, waiting for him at the White House, all tow trucks were not equal. On this day, his desired outcome was to put his car safely in someone else's hands and get to a dinner in less than forty minutes with a clean tux. There was a massive gap between Manny's current and desired future state, and that gap put a premium on what would ordinarily be a relatively simple, cheap, and mundane service.

That's how the desired outcome affects the future state and the value of the gap.

Manny's desire, his personal connection to the outcome of the future state, was the emotional crux of the sale. The sale was no longer based on whether the service or product provided was superior to any other; it was based on the salesperson's ability to enable the desired outcome. Pay close attention: *The sale was no longer based on whether the service or product provided was superior to any other; it was based on the salesperson's ability to enable Manny's desired outcome.* Once the tow truck driver knew what it meant to Manny to get to that White House dinner clean and on time—i.e., Manny's intrinsic motivation—the sale was almost a foregone conclusion. That's the position every salesperson should be angling for, no matter how ordinary or obvious the sale looks on the surface. No salesperson should ever underestimate the value of their service or product to a prospect. You'll always lose the sale if you assume you're too expensive because that assumption will stop you from asking the questions that could reveal the true value of your product to your customer. No one would ever pay a thousand bucks for a tow...until they wind up in a situation where they will.

How to Get to the Heart of the Matter

Your discovery is all about quantifying your prospects' current and future states. You are drilling down for definable, objective goals—an

increase to 20% growth from a current state of 10% growth, for example. Once you know that goal, you have to wonder, though, why not some other goal? Why 20% growth? Why not 30%, or even 50%? Why not 5%? That subjective reason, that intrinsic motivation, is behind every future state. Is it possible that a client who wants to see a 20% growth rate just pulled that number out of the air as a reasonably attainable goal? Sure. More likely though, there is a strategic reason for choosing that number, such as hitting that 20% growth rate will meet their commitment to Wall Street or put them in a position to sell the company.

My interest in learning more about intrinsic motivation is what helped me beat out some of the industry's best-known sales consultants to land one of my favorite clients. My client and now good friend, Darren Gloster is COO and a director of ARMS Reliability, asset management company. This is a sophisticated way of saying that they help large asset-dependent businesses like utility providers or oil and gas companies proactively maintain and manage the machines, equipment, and software that allow them to operate with minimal cost, break-downs, and interruptions whilst maximizing safe, reliable, productive time. Darren is in charge of their global operations across North America, Europe, Australia and Latin America. At the time I met him, the company was entering the third year of a five-year plan that was contingent on a significant amount of ramp and growth. Unfortunately, their sales strategies weren't delivering the results they needed to meet their goals. They were growing, but not as fast as they wanted to, and Darren was concerned that their growth might even slow down. As he put it, "I had a gut feeling that we were going to hit our ceiling of growth, so we needed to continue to develop the skill sets and capabilities of the sales team that we had in place. We weren't going to get the sales results we wanted to achieve by not developing the team and sticking with the same strategies while expecting a different result. So, Darren started looking for someone to help improve their sales management strategies and teach them better ways to lead the team and improve everyone's forecasting accuracy and sales performance. He wound up screening four consultants, three of whom he found through their bestselling sales books. I was the last. Darren threw me into the mix because he had seen me speak at a conference, and though that talk was centered more around personal branding and marketing, not sales—the emphasis of my first book, *Not Taught*—he liked my pragmatic content and entertaining delivery style. He figured it couldn't hurt to talk to me and see what I had to say.

Darren was taken aback at how our conversation differed from the ones he had with the other consultants. Since Darren thought he knew

what his problem was, the other three were happy to let him tell them about his challenges and how he thought they should be fixed. But my gap-selling process took such a different approach that in Darren's words, it "kind of smacked me over the head." He offered to explain the effect of gap selling from a buyer's perspective, and why he decided to go with me ([A Sales Guy Consulting](#)). See the next page for what Darren said:

As a group of shareholders, we were doing well. But there was this five-year plan that we had drifted from. We had tried internally to reshape the business with new software and the addition of territories, but progress was slower than desired. Keenan was the first and only person who dug into the question, "How far are you from your goal?"

I knew the number. It was significant and we were 29% off our plan. But I'd never actually stopped to realize, "Holy shit, that is a lot of money! Perhaps we're not performing as well as we think we are."

And then Keenan did a great job of exploring all the issues, jumping from them to the business problems, and then from the business problems to the impacts they were having, to the root causes and back. He was all over the place, in a good way. You could tell he was in a zone, trying to uncover what was going on in our organization, why it was happening and how it was affecting our ability to hit our five-year plan. He almost didn't seem to care in terms of what we actually did. It was like, I don't really care what product or service you offer because selling to him is selling—you can apply the methodology or principles to anything.

The other important thing is that Keenan pointed out three things that I hadn't factored as potential problems or constraints for us. He thought our organizational structure—the way the team reported globally—was one of the main barriers to our future success and future growth. That wasn't on my radar at all. He honed in on our coaching process. And finally, he assessed that some of the people on the team might not have the ability to grow as needed. We would have to provide new skills, coaching, mentoring and training, and recast the way we had always done things, to provide a new framework from which we could operate.

I was very focused on what I thought the problems were and what I thought the solutions were. The fact that he threw those things in and identified them as problems, yet the other consultants hadn't done that . . . it was a bit of a light bulb moment.

The other people were pandering on what I said the problems were. Keenan, on the other hand, put himself in the seat next to me and made me feel like I had a co-pilot who was going to make sure we landed the plane

safely. He expanded my awareness of my own sales organization. He created an amazing level of credibility. I didn't feel like I was engaged in a sales call at all. It felt like we had already hired him and were collaboratively solving my problems. The experience was night and day from the conversations I had with the other consultants.

Darren had a goal but had lost sight of the path to get there. Gap selling allowed me to push all the distractions aside and show him exactly where things were going wrong and where he was headed if he didn't make some changes. (Look, there's that change word again.) Once you know your customers desired future state and intrinsic motivations, all that's left is to make sure they not only believe that that future state can happen, but that you can make it happen better than anyone else.

How do you get to the heart of that motivation? After summarizing everything your customers tell you about their current state and what they want to see in their future state, try saying this:

"Tell me a bit about what is driving this change."

If you've been gap selling until this point, your customers will be honest with you. The answer you receive will give you a distinct and important edge over the competition by providing you with the last detail you need to perfectly customize and fine-tune your sale. It lays out a path to the close no one else will be able to see.

From this moment on, you will focus your sale on your customers intrinsic motivation because it's all they're going to be thinking about whenever they decide anyway. You might even consider thinking about your customers' future state as a three-part entity. For example, there's a technical future state: New software could increase the number of sales and make it easier for a company to engage with their customers, simplify and streamline the buying process, and make it easier for the company to run reports. Then, there's a business future state: All those technical improvements will increase customer satisfaction, the number of orders will rise, and word of mouth will surge. Finally, there's the core of the future state: All of these improvements will enable us to beat the competition. Our stock price will go up. The board will be happy. Every step of the discovery process is equally important in leading you right up to this moment: When you can get to the heart of why your customer wants to buy, you get to the heart of the sale.

Drumroll, Please . . .

You know your customers' current state, future state, and intrinsic motivation. Now you have permission to start talking about your product or service! That's right, you finally get to pitch. You can start

sharing information about what your product does. You can explain why your service is better than that of any other competitor on the market.

In other words, you can start selling!

Crazy, isn't it, how much later in the process you start to actually sell when you're selling to the gap? See, people following the traditional selling playbook usually start here. And it's why they fail. If you start selling too early, you'll miss all the important developmental work that makes gap selling such a winning strategy. You're launching the sale without a map. You won't know your customers' current state. You'll be blind to their future state. You'll be clueless about their intrinsic motivations. You won't have the information you need to properly navigate. Remember, people don't buy unless they are compelled to change. People are compelled to change by evaluating their current state against a potential or desired future state. That's simply how we make decisions. Therefore, as salespeople, we will be far more successful in influencing the sale if we are able to do the work for them. By making sure our customers have a crystal- clear view of their current and future states, we facilitate the process and increase the probability that they will change, or as they say in sales vernacular, that they will buy.

If you were to close this book right now, you'd miss out on a lot, but at the very least you would walk away with this crucial piece of knowledge: If you've ever struggled to close deals, or had a customer go dark, or thought you had the deal closed and all of sudden lost it to someone else, it's almost guaranteed that it's because you started a third of the way into the sales process instead of at the beginning. You tried to take off from the middle of the runway, which didn't leave you enough room to gather the speed you needed to fly. Don't take shortcuts; they only lead to nosedives.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

How To Do A Kickass Demo

For many salespeople today, a product demo is the lifeblood of the sale. If the demo goes bad, it's almost impossible to recover. Yet, far too often I cringe as I watch salespeople butcher the demo. Inevitably, the buyer fades away, never to return. It doesn't have to be this way. The demo can be a salesperson's opportunity to shine and increase their ability to win the sale. But to do this, you have to crush the demo. Gap selling will make sure you do.

There are four elements to a kick ass demo. Get them right.

1. No discovery, no demo

Given the in-depth nature of a gap-selling discovery, you may have already figured out that you should never, ever combine a discovery and a demo. For those of you who didn't, I'll say it again: You should never, ever combine a discovery and a demo. Let me be clear that I mean you need to schedule two different time slots on two different days. And no, splitting the demo into two sections, thirty minutes for discovery and thirty minutes for the demo, *is not* doing a separate discovery. The two serve completely different purposes and need to be treated that way. In addition, a robust demo is wholly contingent on a thorough discovery. You can't conduct a proper demo if you haven't asked all those open-ended probing, process, and provoking questions which will get you to the bottom of your customer's current and future states. You can't customize your demo unless you know what problems you are trying to solve. Remember, a discovery should answer the following questions:

1. Does the prospect have a problem you can fix?
2. Does the prospect agree they have a problem?
3. Does the prospect want to fix the problem?
4. Will the prospect go on a journey with you to fix the problem?

What this means is that sometimes you're going to have to refuse to do a demo even when the customer is eager to learn more about your product or service. I know that sounds crazy, but it's really important. Don't try to work around this rule and squeeze a discovery in during the first ten minutes of your demo, either—you'll short-change both of them. Instead, if a customer refuses a discovery, inform them that the demo is actually a two-step process, and that

without a discovery, it's impossible to conduct a proper, customized demo. And that's the truth! A gap sales demo isn't just a way for you to showcase your wares. It's your chance to help the buyer see how your product or service will fit into their department or organization and make their future state better than their current one.

One way to get around a buyer's reluctance to let you do a discovery is to schedule the discovery and demo as if they were one event occurring over a two-day period. Make sure to give yourself enough time in between the discovery meeting and demo (maybe three to four days), to process all the information you glean from the discovery so you can really think through the specific recommendations you will offer your customer to properly customize the demo.

2. No ifs

If you have done a thorough discovery, you will know with great certainty what problems your customer is dealing with. That means there will never be a reason to say the word "if," as in, "If you have this problem, then . . ." Or, "If you ever struggle with..." There is no "if" during a demo because *you're supposed to already know!* If at this point you're guessing at what might be troubling your customer and trying to demo features you think they might like or you think might be valuable to them, you have done a lousy discovery. It would be better to go back and get all the information you need before even starting, because if you move forward with a demo now, you're not going to get the sale.

But what if you know the potential of your product, and you've seen what it can do for a business, and you want your customer to be aware that it can help them in a multitude of ways? Then is it OK to say "if?"

No! You're not focusing on what the customer really cares about if you are presenting for every contingency their business could face. You'll come off as unfocused, and your customer will feel overwhelmed. Probably bored, too. Maybe even irritated. It's like handing a teenager two pair of cargo shorts, a bathing suit, and a wool sweater when she comes into your store looking for something to wear to prom. I mean, sure, one day it is possible she will need these items—summer and winter do come along, after all—but your customer is not in bathing-suit mode right now and quite frankly, it would be distracting and annoying to be asked to think about bathing suits when all you care about is finding the perfect dress before 5 p.m. Saturday night.

Demo Challenge: Try to conduct your entire 45-60 minute presentation without saying the word “if.”
If you succeed, you’ll have conducted a good demo.

3. Stick to Six Features

Did you know you can use your iPhone as a level to make sure surfaces are straight? That you can give contacts unique notification tones so you can tell who texted you without looking? How about that you can take a photo without touching your phone by tapping the volume control on a connected pair of headphones? Even if you did, did any of those features make or break your decision to buy the phone? Probably not, because you are just like every other buyer in the world. A product may be jam-packed with features, but prospects that buy only do so because of a select few.

The point of your demo is not to reveal all of your product’s features and functions. It’s to reveal how well your product provides the solution to your buyer’s specific problems. While customers often have numerous wants and needs, there are generally only a handful of serious business problems that really matter to them. And since a demo should only be an hour long max, you want to be sure to give each of those problems the attention they deserve. If you’re trying to cram more than six features into your demo, there’s no way you can spend the appropriate amount of time showcasing each. It is always better to spend a lot of time highlighting one feature’s business value than it is to spend a little time introducing a whole bunch of features that may or may not be relevant to solving your buyer’s problems. Think quality, not quantity.

4. Anchor Your Customer

Anchoring is a psychological term used to describe a cognitive bias that people use to make decisions. If your grandfather’s eyes bug out of his head at the idea of paying \$5.25 for a Starbucks venti salted caramel mocha Frappuccino, it’s because his reference point—his anchor—is a 10¢ cup of joe. Black. No sugar. And what the hell is a venti, anyway? You young people...

Grandpa is relying too much on the first piece of information he ever received—the cost of a cup of coffee back in the 1940s—to determine the value of a cup of coffee today. That’s his anchor. There are other anchors people commonly rely on, like the original price of a discounted item (which we think tells us whether or not we’re getting a good deal), or the purchase price of our own homes (which we think tells us how much our home should sell for later). All humans tend to make judgment calls based on the first piece of information to which

they are exposed. Sometimes you picked up that information years ago, like Grandpa, and sometimes you just notice the higher numbers on a price tag. Regardless, when you task your brain with making a decision, it's going to glom onto that bit of information and elevate its importance, possibly at the expense of other pieces of information that might have greater relevance (like the fact that the price of the item is still 25% higher than you'd pay elsewhere).

All humans do this. So, when doing your demo, your goal should be to get your prospects to see your solution as the first and best solution to their problem so that it becomes the baseline against which they judge any other solution. You want your solution to become their anchor. You will do this by focusing their attention on the future state. Here's how:

Throughout your presentation, after every feature demo ask your prospect affirming questions, like this:

"Can you see how this feature will improve your churn rate?"

"Do you see how this will shorten data input?"

"Can you see how this will increase your conversions?"

For once, yes or no answers will be acceptable! Getting your customer to affirm the value of every feature you present anchors your prospects in your solution and its effect on shaping their future state. As you paint a powerful vision of the future, make sure your customers see the same one you do.

There's another benefit to asking affirming questions or anchoring: It confirms that you're hitting your mark. A good discovery should be enough to ensure that you target the right problems and offer solutions the customer will find valuable. But let's face it, sometimes we whiff. Maybe the customer's issues were super complicated, or we overlooked a key question. It can happen. Asking validating questions will help you catch your mistakes and give you a chance to gauge how well you're connecting with your customer. If you ask a customer if they can see how your solution will positively impact their business and they say "No," you know you've got a problem. Stop the demo right away and start digging for more information so you can get yourself back on track. Asking validating questions will ensure that all of the information you've gathered is accurate and true. They can save you weeks and even months of time trying to close a sale that, unbeknownst to you, went off the rails in the middle of your demo.

Start With Your Demo Map

Remember the PIC (Problem Identification Chart)? Take a look at it

again. Check the list of problems you've identified as ones that your solution can resolve, and organize them in order of the impact they are having on your customers organization from greatest to least. Big problems create big motivations to change. Little problems don't. Don't waste your time on little problems.

This list will serve as a demo map. If an issue or problem doesn't appear on the list, don't mention it. In this way, your buyers will receive a customized demo perfectly tailored for their needs, which will enable them to see exactly how your product or service can get them to their desired outcomes. Like a mirror in a dressing room, your demo should show customers exactly how your product is going to look on them.

It's ***still*** not about you!

Get it out of your head that the purpose of your demo is to show off all of your product's bells and whistles or to reveal all the cool features. As with everything about gap selling, the demo is not about you or your product. Customers don't care that your product can do a Boolean search faster than most, or that your product can record and segment multiple callers or voices into unique segments, or that your product can turn lead into gold.

Your customers do not give a shit about your product. What do they care about?

They care about how your product is going to solve their problems. That's it. That's *all*!

So, unless that Boolean search, call recording features or the lead-into-gold thing is going to help solve the problem(s) they told you they are struggling with, don't waste their time or yours talking about them or anything else that doesn't solve their stated problems.

Customers buy what they value. The more value you can create through your demo, the greater the probability that you will close the deal.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Move Your Deals Through The Pipeline

Predictability is one of a B2B seller's biggest concerns. It's the thing that keeps you sane when you've got thirty opportunities in your pipeline and your manager is demanding to know when each one is going to close. If you've established a predictable system, there's no need to sweat it because you know exactly when each of those opportunities will close. If you have no idea or you're only guessing, you're setting yourself up for chaos and trouble. The next three steps are designed to help you extract all the information needed to establish predictability by allowing you to plan ahead, keep your opportunities on track, and seal the deal every time.

1. Nail Down their Decision Criteria

One thing that you've probably noticed throughout this book is that much of the time when we're selling, we're actually double checking that our customers want what they think they want. It's not that they're stupid or not good at what they do; it's that much of the time they're too close to the problem. That's why being an industry expert is such a vital part of being a good salesperson. The longer you're in the field and the more people you meet and the more problems you help solve, the better you are at quickly identifying pitfalls and unintended consequences, as well as gauging how well your product or service will actually deliver the results your customers envision in their future state. By the time you get to this stage in the sale, you know their current state, you know their future state, and you know their intrinsic motivation. In other words, you know their what and their why. But if you want to keep your prospects moving through the pipeline and get to the next stage, you have to know their how.

So the next thing you're going to find out is their decision criteria. The decision criteria are the information and details the customer is going to use to decide which solution they are going to choose. Understanding your buyer's decision criteria ahead of time gives you amazing insight into what it's going to take to win the deal and how the buyer is looking at their problem and future state. The decision criteria are like a cheat sheet, and when combined with a proper discovery, it is gold.

Hint: The decision criteria should align with what you learned in the discovery. For example, if a customer's decision criteria included how well the software integrated with SAP but you didn't uncover any

need for SAP integration in your discovery, you missed something and you'll want to get on it immediately. Asking your buyer to outline their decision criteria is key and offers tremendous insight.

Learning the decision criteria normally isn't very difficult. Simply ask, "How are you going to decide what's the best solution for you? What will be the most important factors in helping you make your decision?"

If you were selling call recording software designed to allow sales managers to monitor and record sales calls so they can properly coach and train their teams, your customer might tick off the following:

1. Price
2. How easy it is to cut a clip out of a longer conversation and share it electronically
3. How well the annotation option works
4. User friendliness

With these answers, your customer is telling you what they believe is important. But remember, earlier they also told you something else—their desired future state. So now hold the factors they'll use to make their decision up against that desired future state. Do they align?

Keep this in mind: The point of this exercise isn't to confirm that your product or service can do the things your customer most wants it to do. Rather, it's to confirm that the criteria they value the most and are using to make their decision will actually get them the desired outcome they say they want. For example, the head of a theater company might tell you that one of the most important things she will consider when making her decision is if the software will be able to offer her members (season ticket holders) the ability to pick their own seats for each individual show as opposed to having the same seat for every show. But if earlier she informed you that the business problem she was trying to solve was how to increase first-time ticket buyers and her desired outcome in the future was to increase revenue through first-time ticket buyers, whether they became members or not, why is a feature that allows them to pick their own seats for each show relevant to the decision? You'd need to find out.

Here's what you could say:

"I'm confused. You said growing revenue by increasing first-time ticket buyers was your most important priority, but some of the criteria

you've said you're going to use to decide whether to make this purchase won't have any effect on increasing first-time ticket buyers. Did I misunderstand what you're trying to accomplish? Can you explain why these criteria are so important to you?"

You're not pushing back—you're protecting your client. Customers can completely undermine their future state if they base their decisions on the wrong criteria. Let's say good manners are normally a high-priority criterion for Manny, our stranded White House dinner guest, and let's say that instead of getting a polite tow truck driver, he wound up dealing with a real jerk. If in his future state he's eating roast beef with horseradish sauce in the First Family's Dining Room, his driver's manners shouldn't even factor into his thoughts as he weighs whether to pay a thousand bucks to the tow truck driver that promises to get his car off the road and him to the city in time for dinner. Think about it. His other options are 1. hold out for a cheaper tow or rideshare that will get him to dinner late, or 2. fix his tire himself, which will make him dirty *and* late. There's no contest. He can hold out for a polite tow truck driver the next time he needs roadside assistance; today, he needs to get where he's going, and fast.

Do yourself and your customers a solid and confirm that your customers' decision criteria are aligned with their own desired outcomes and objectives. If they're not, you need to be prepared to challenge them to make sure their reasoning is robust, or realign them if necessary—but not because they're taking a different path than the one you think they should. This is important: Your goal here should not be to steer them to where you think you have the best chance of closing the deal, but to make sure they have thought through why they want what they say they want. Make them own their decisions.

My Four Favorite Words

There's a reason I suggested you challenge your buyer starting with the words, "I'm confused. You said . . ." Those four words, in that order, are four of my favorites. They are *powerful*. I love using them to challenge buyers and prospects, which is exactly what you need to do when you spot inconsistencies between what buyers say they want in their future state, and the methods, approaches, and decision criteria they're using to get there. Your ability to identify, call out, or resolve these inconsistencies is a measure of the added value you bring as a salesperson. You need to get good at it.

It's not always easy. Challenging your customers without tact, diplomacy, or grace can make them feel incompetent, inattentive, or insecure, which is not conducive to the collaborative, enthusiastic mindset you want your customer to have when you're gap selling. No

one likes to be called out for their mistakes, but sometimes you have to do it. A doctor would never continue with ineffective treatments just because letting patients know it wasn't working would be embarrassing. Same applies here.

By prefacing your challenge with "I'm confused, you said . . ." you give buyers a way to save face. Those two words suggest you're inviting discussion, not indicting them or attacking them for being wrong. "I'm confused" (or "I was under the impression," or "I thought . . .") allows for the possibility that the mistake is yours. This gives you leeway to encourage introspection instead of defensiveness, and to engage in a discussion rather than a debate. Learning to identify inconsistencies between what buyers say they want and the decisions they make is critical to gap selling and moving deals forward. Starting with "I'm confused, you said . . ." before listing the inconsistencies or discrepancies you find confusing is one of the best ways to disarm your prospect, invite a discussion, and resolve problems before they start.

2. Know the Buying Process

The next question you want to ask so you can understand how to move the sale forward is, "Can you tell me a little about your company's buying process?"

This isn't about finding out what factors they are considering as they decide whether or not to buy. That's decision criteria, which we just discussed, and you should already know it. This question is literally about knowing all the steps your customers will have to follow before they can decide to buy. For example, their standard procedure might be to request an RFP from all their candidates, choose the three best, ask those potential providers to come in to the office and present in front of a committee, pick the winner from among those three, negotiate a contract, and then present the contract to the company CEO for signature. Another company might have to talk to HR. Yet another might tell you that they have two partners and they have to discuss the matter together before being able to move forward. Each scenario gives you a vastly different timeline for how long it will take you to complete the sale, and each scenario also tells you whom you are eventually going to have to influence. Combine what you know about the 1. decision criteria with the 2. buying process steps to properly build your deal strategy. Maybe you know you don't provide RFPs, so you pull out of the sale right away. Or, maybe now that you know HR is going to be involved, you can prepare to get HR's current and future state when you get a chance. Or maybe you can ask for a meeting with the partners you haven't yet met.

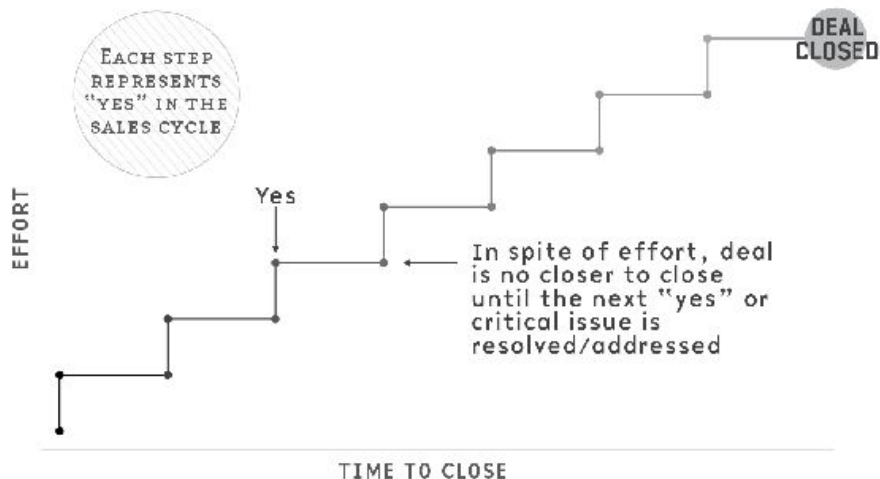
Knowing your customer's buying process is like getting a topographic map of the land. You already knew what direction you wanted to go, but now you can see where you might run into a steep valley, a hill, or a river. It allows you to be prepared for anything.

Many salespeople underestimate the importance of understanding customer buying processes. Yet nothing, and I mean nothing, can mess up sales more predictability than not understanding the buying process and who's involved. According to the folks at Gartner, who in addition to *The Challenger Sale* wrote the killer book *The Challenger Customer*, there are now 5.4 buyers in every sale.^{xiv} That's right, the average decision process involves 5.4 buyers! Can you see what kind of risk and unpredictability you're setting yourself up for if you don't know your customers' buying process and the players involved? Don't create problems for yourself. Spending extra time learning everything you can about the players involved in the sale and the process your customers will use to determine whether or not to buy will allow you to estimate how long the sale will take, mitigate risks, and most importantly, tell you who you need to engage with to get the deal.

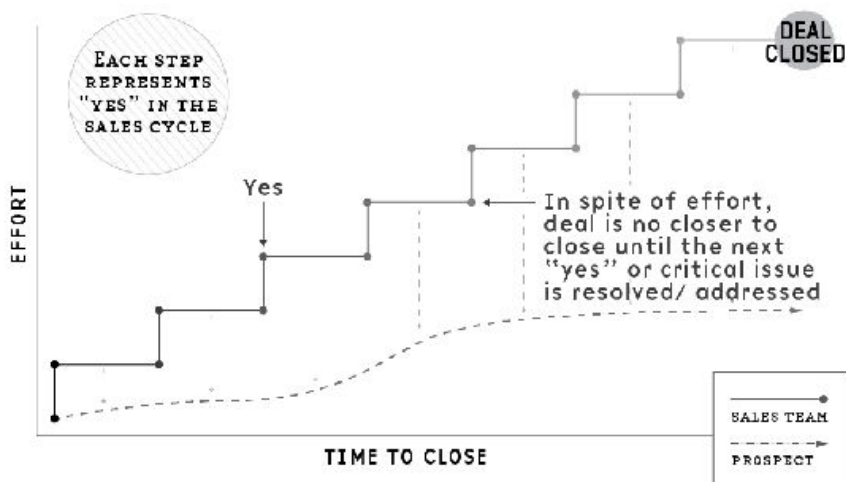
3. Focus on the Next Yes

If you've been in sales long enough, you know that a sales cycle is made up of a set of stages that allow us and our organizations to properly track our opportunities and gauge the probability of a close. Unfortunately, most of us are taught that sales cycles are linear. But that's wrong. It's a mistake that has caused many salespeople to exhaust themselves unnecessarily, and even wind up completely off track.

A sales cycle should actually look more like a rising staircase than a horizontal straight line.



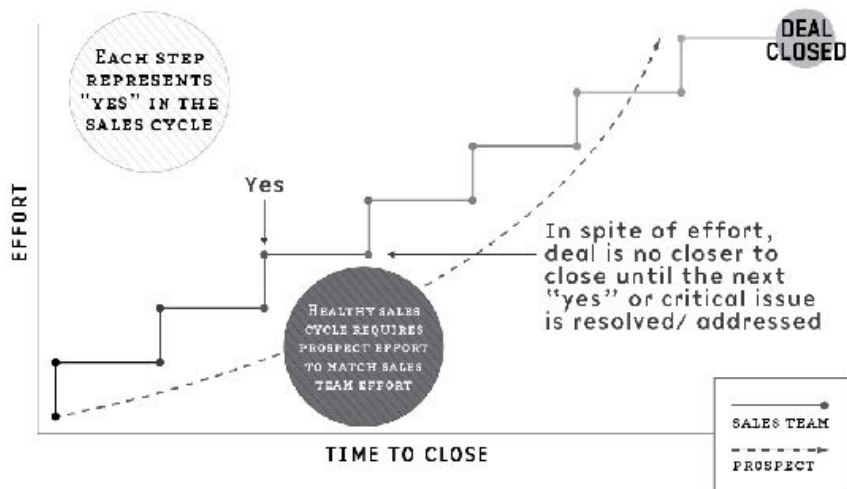
In a typical graph, the y-axis on a sales cycle represents how much effort a salesperson puts into the sale; the x-axis marks the time it takes to close. The problem is in many cases, the only person whose line is rising up the Y-axis is the salesperson's, while the prospect's efforts stay pretty flat, like this:



Salespeople tend to think if they're putting superhuman effort into the sale, they must be moving it forward. Unfortunately, they're only moving it upward.

What makes a sale move forward? The word "Yes." Remember how we discussed that you have to earn an invitation to help the customer? Every single yes you hear from the customer is a renewed agreement to work with you. If you're not hearing yes," you're not approaching the close. Make no mistake, every yes you hear is a small sale. In fact, a sale is made up of hundreds of little sales conducted throughout the selling cycle. Early on, you'll want to hear the

customer agree that yes, there is a problem and yes, he's willing to work with you to solve it. Once you move into suggesting a solution, you'll want to hear yes, the solution could indeed be a good fit for the organization. Later, if you know that the decision process included a meeting with the CEO, you'll want to hear yes, we'd be happy to set you up to meet with the CEO. If you know you can't make the sale without seeing product specs, you'll want to do what it takes to make your customer ready to say, yes, we'll send them your way. At each step in the sales cycle, you and your customers should be moving together toward whatever it is your customers say needs to happen before they can buy. If you're gap selling, they should be as invested in the process as you are. Graphed, a gap sale would look like this:



Note that as both participants move across the X-axis, they are simultaneously moving up the Y-axis. The closer customers get to buying, the more engaged they're going to be and the more willing they'll be to do the work necessary to close. If you're a car salesman, it's all well and good if customers call to talk about cars they've seen online, but until they agree to come in for a test drive, you're spinning your wheels in place, not moving the sale forward. In this case, your focus wouldn't be on selling the car but on selling the test drive, because you can't close without it. You always have to have your eye on the next small sale and make sure you're providing enough value to compel your customer to say "yes" to it. If your customer resists, it's time to go back to your discovery and figure out what part of their current state, future state, or intrinsic motivation you still haven't learned.

Earlier we talked about how part of our jobs as salespeople is to protect our customers from choosing changes and solutions that won't actually solve their problems, might make them worse, or might unintentionally cause new ones. This often happens because people

are too close to the problem and can't see the bigger picture. Salespeople can fall into a flip version of this trap, fixing their eyes on the close ahead and forgetting what they're selling to at the moment. Some of these people consider themselves good closers, but that's not something to brag about. Good closers are bad salespeople. Their whole focus is on the final big Yes. They pitch their story, show their wares, and then when they get to the end of the sale, they try to get their customer to make a decision. But by remaining fixated on a single big sale, they don't close all the small sales that need to happen to make the big sale fall into place. Good closers lose a lot of little deals within the sales process. As in chess, looking ahead helps you see patterns and enables you to prepare for eventualities, but you still have to pay attention to what's happening right in front of your nose and adjust to it. Every small yes moves you closer to the sale.

So checking off those three steps—nailing down the decision criteria, knowing the buying process, and focusing on next yeses (aka the mini-sale within a sale)—will all help to ensure that you can move your deal smoothly through the pipeline. But there's one more thing you need to remember.

You're Not the Customer's B*tch

Keeping the pipeline moving is crucial, but let me make this very clear: A good salesperson is a consultant, a collaborator, a partner—not a servant. You know what that means? The customer is not always right. In fact, customers can often be their own worst enemies. In general, successfully solving problems requires partnership and information sharing. It's a result of two or more people or entities sharing the workload and committing to the same outcome. That's why a balanced sales cycle shows both the client and the salesperson's line rising along that Y-axis as the sale progresses.

It's not that you aren't going to work hard to make the sale. Selling to the moment takes attention, patience, and mental agility. It can be challenging and time-consuming; too many salespeople believe that the only way to move a sale forward through the pipeline is to cater to customers' every request or whim, or interpret their reticence to share information as a cue to double down on their efforts. That's wrong. Just as investors need to weigh their ROI (return on investment) when deciding where to place their money, salespeople need to consider their ROSE (return on sales effort) when judging where to target their energy and time. That often means learning to say no.

The more you value yourself, your knowledge of the space in which you sell, and your understanding of your buyers' problems, the more your customers will value you. A great salesperson isn't a gofer or a servant. A great salesperson is a skilled consultant and valuable

asset. And you need to behave like one.
Here's the test:

- If your customer says jump and you ask "how high?"
- If the customer asks for a quote and you deliver it without asking why
- If the customer asks for a free trial but won't share their results
- If you meet all your customer requests but they won't meet yours
- If the customer expects you to change your business model to meet their needs and you do
- If the customer only likes you if you give them the pricing they want
- If the customer continually asks for things, but won't give anything in return

...you're the customer's b*tch. And you have to stop!

But:

- If you make it clear that you know as much or more than your customer about industry trends
- If you understand and can explain the nuances of solving the key problems associated with your products or services
- If you're as aware (or even more aware) than your customer of what the competition is doing
- If you continually provide relevant customer insights
- If the client can rely on you for direction and advice
- If you don't push products, services, or features and benefits
- If you have a strong social following because of your shared content
- If you are a relied-upon resource in LinkedIn groups or

- If customers know you have the answers they need to solve complex business challenges

...you are an asset and a critical element to your client's success. Not their b*tch.

This isn't just a matter of self-respect; it's a mindset that will allow you to sell better. While the role of a skilled gap seller is to help the customer feel comfortable and in control, you should never actually lose control of the sale. And that's what you're doing if you become a subservient lackey. If all you're doing is what the customer tells you to do, you're not providing the expertise, professional insight, and guidance they need from you. Don't let your fear of losing the sale compromise the caliber of your work. That's what would turn you into a customer's b*tch. Instead, let fear be a guide. If you find yourself afraid of losing the deal, it's probably a sign you've lost control. If you're feeling fearful, it means you're not gap selling. If you're afraid, it means you don't understand where the customer is. It means you don't have the information you need to influence your buyers. It means you're at the mercy of your customers, and that's the beginning of the end. Why? Because when you're at the mercy of your buyers, they are no longer letting you help them. It is no longer a collaborative sale and those types of deals rarely close. Don't let fear enter the equation. Know your stuff and don't become the customer's b*tch.

The balance of power shifts throughout a sale. In the beginning, when you're first trying to get a prospect's attention, it's totally asymmetrical. You have no power and you deserve no respect. It is up to you to earn it. After all, unless the buyer called or emailed you first, you're the one interrupting their day with a request for attention, so you'd better be prepared to show that you're worth it. If you follow all of the gap-selling techniques we've covered so far in this book, proving your value shouldn't be a problem.

However, once your customer agrees to go on this sales journey with you—once they start regularly saying “yes”—the sale should equalize into a partnership. And in partnerships, one person isn't doing all the giving while the other does all the taking. In a partnership, each person gives the other what they need to be and do their best. They mutually support each other toward success. So if you need a document or information that will help you do a better job for your customer and they refuse to provide it, you shouldn't just turn away and try to make do without. You should stand your ground and

help them understand why it's in their best interest—why it will be useful to them—to help you. And if they make unreasonable demands of you, you're not required to oblige unless you know you're going to get something useful in return.

For example, let's say you're selling software and you have successfully worked through the discovery. Then, right in the middle of the solution stage, your customer informs you that she's definitely interested in your product, but before committing she needs a 90-day trial. You explain that your company doesn't do trials, and this is an unreasonable demand anyway. You start asking questions: What is she hoping to accomplish with the trial? How will a trial get her to her desired outcome? She's not interested in explaining herself and digs in her heels. This is how they do things at their company. No trial, no sale.

But you are not the customer's b*tch. You now have two options: 1. You can say no. Sure, that might scuttle the sale right away, but at least you wouldn't be on tenterhooks for three months scrambling to make sure that if she bails you can fill the hole in your sales projections. Or, 2. you can set terms. You could agree to a 90-day trial, *if*:

- The customer pays an installation fee
- The customer provides clear and measurable success criteria so you know what kind of metrics you're trying to meet
- The customer commits to purchasing the software if you meet that success criteria

In this way, you recalibrate the relationship to make sure that both parties are sharing equally in risk and responsibility. You're acknowledging an unreasonable demand, then turning it into a reasonable one.

This might come as a surprise, but customers often acquiesce in these instances. Just as higher prices often reflect quality and value, so does standing strong behind your product and principles. It can reaffirm your perceived value and make clients want to work with you more. Now, sometimes the customer will refuse, in which case you should tell them to pound sand. But be strong enough to explain yourself: "I get why you want this trial, but just because you want it doesn't mean I have to give it. We need to be working together on this and if you can't meet me halfway, we're not right for each other."

A sales relationship is like a marriage. You and your customer

have to give and take as equals with an eye toward the same goals, or it just won't work.

This advice doesn't only apply when the customer is making unreasonable demands, by the way. For example, you know those times when you contact customers and they ask you to send them your pricing before you've had a chance to learn anything about them, or for them to learn much about you? They've never spoken to you, they've never met you, they don't want to set up a meeting or a follow-up call to explain why they think they might need your product or service, they just want to see what it costs. You can and should say no. Gap selling is about building relationships and solving problems. You literally can't do your job properly if you agree to let them determine your value to them based on nothing more than prices. You're not McDonald's serving exactly the same thing to every customer who comes through your doors.

The next time this happens, explain that you can't send over pricing until you understand the customer's organization, what problems he is trying to solve, and what he hopes to accomplish. You would never ask him to short-change his customers; you can't agree to anything that would short-change yours. In addition, the value of a product or service can fluctuate dramatically depending on how desperately customers want to change their current state or ensure their desired outcomes. If there's one thing we learned from Manny's story, it's that a price that seems exorbitant to a customer one minute can look like pocket change the next. It all depends on how what you're charging weighs against the customer's desired outcome. We'll further discuss how to clear up stand-offs on price and other potential clogs in the pipeline in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Troubleshooting

Your discovery went great, you're cruising along the sale, you're totally simpatico with your customer, you're confident they're going to be thrilled when they see how well your product works and how much better it makes their work life, and you've told your boss that you predict the sale will close by the end of the month and then *bam!* You hit a proverbial wall so hard there are brick marks on your face.

As customers get close to finalizing their decisions and committing to your product or service, they can second-guess, get cold feet, get busy, or just give their thought process another good, thorough review to make sure they haven't overlooked any complications or minimized any downsides. If there is ever a time in the sale that will test how well you did your discovery and how accurately you assessed their current state and their desired future state, it's now.

When a Prospect Goes Dark

The last time you spoke with your prospect, she was super excited to learn everything your product could do for her department and told you she was going to bring a proposal to her boss, and that she was confident she could get approval for the purchase before the end of the month. You hung up feeling pumped, made a note in the CRM, and set a reminder to check in with her about two weeks later to arrange the next steps. Fast forward two weeks and your reminder alert pops up. You make the call and leave a voicemail that your prospect fails to answer. You make a note to call again in two days if she doesn't get back to you. The two days go by and you try again. Still no answer. It's all good, you leave another message. You also send a quick email. Two more days pass, and still no sign of your prospect. You're getting a little freaked out. What happened? This was in the bag! How are you going to explain this to your manager? You were counting on this deal to make your numbers this quarter. You send another email and leave another voicemail. Radio silence. Now you're desperate. You're also screwed. You've lost control of the sale.

Don't kid yourself—your emails didn't get lost in the ether, and your voicemails didn't disappear. Prospects know when they owe you a response. And most of the time, they feel bad that they haven't gotten in touch. If they went so far as to tell you they were interested in going forward with the deal and now they've disappeared, you can bet they're not purposely trying to be rude; something has happened on their end that they weren't anticipating. But getting desperate and begging them to talk to you by "just checking in" isn't going to

prompt them to explain themselves. The next time this happens to you—and it will—don't become desperate. Instead, be direct. If you've been gap selling, you'll have all the information you need to hold your prospects accountable and encourage them to explain themselves.

You start with those four little words, "I'm confused. You said..." which highlights the gap between your prospects' words and actions. Then you remind them of their current state and how avoiding you is keeping them away from the future state they said they wanted. "I'm confused. You said you were tired of getting beat out for bigger, more complex projects, and you agreed that my product would improve your value proposition tenfold and get you to your financial goals. So I'm surprised I haven't heard from you. Has something changed? Were you able to solve your problem? Have you decided not to pursue bigger projects?"

Basically, in the nicest way possible you're holding them accountable for their own words and proving that you understand their problem, what it will take to fix it, and the consequences of not fixing it. You're also pointing out that unless their goals have changed, by avoiding you they are sacrificing their future state and desired outcomes. Now, maybe they've decided to go with a different solution, or maybe their boss got laid off, or maybe they're just swamped. Regardless of what's going on, you need to know! You need to get them to re-engage. You won't be able to reel every deal back in, but reclaiming five prospects that result in two additional sales per year could make a big difference to your yearly quota. It's worth the effort and if you're gap selling, you'll have all the tools you need to make it work for you.

Jumpstarting a Stalled Deal

This is a common problem, too. You've established a great rapport with your prospect, you both agree that your product could boost the organization to the next level, but then everything starts to go very s-l-o-w-l-y. Meetings get postponed, specs don't get sent when they were promised, and nothing gets done. The prospect keeps taking your calls, and keeps reiterating his interest, but the deal is stuck in the pipeline and all you get are excuses. Maybe they're really not that into you?

Maybe, maybe not. There are a million reasons why prospects might suddenly shift their priorities. If this happens—and it will—you'll do the same thing you would do if a deal goes dark: Remind the customer of their current state, their desired future state, and the impact they're suffering by putting off their desired outcomes. "Tom, I'm more than happy to push that meeting off another week, but I'm a little confused. You said that every month that goes by without a new

system in place you're losing money, and yet you were hoping to increase your profits next year by 4%. It's going to get awfully hard for you to reach that goal if we keep going at this rate, isn't it? Is that OK?" Your prospect is either going to defend the delay or thank you for lighting a fire under his butt. Either way, the conversation is on, you can get them to recommit that they are still interested in solving the problem, you have a chance at getting them to another "yes," and you have a better idea of what to expect insofar as making your own goals.

Overcoming Objections

Traditionally, salespeople have been taught to overcome objections by asking clarifying questions. So if you're an eco-friendly cleaning company and an initially enthusiastic potential client suddenly paused and said, "You know, I'd love to work with you, but I really wanted to support a local business," a traditional response would be, "Could you clarify why that's so important to you?" And that's not an invalid question. The problem is the answer it gets you, which is likely going to be something along the lines of, "I like to keep my money as close to the local economy as possible, and you're a franchise based out of state. I'd rather support a truly local start-up."

Now you're hosed, because there's nothing you can do to work around that.

However, if you know your prospect's current state and future state, you don't have to get him to clarify the objection. Instead, you ask him to clarify his desired outcome. "Wait, I'm confused. I understand your interest in supporting local businesses, but you told me that the most important thing to you when hiring a cleaning company was that it was wholly committed to using environmentally friendly products whenever possible. Our green cleaning products aren't add-ons; our whole business is built around them with the exception of a few carefully chosen disinfectants and sanitizers. Is there a local company that can make the same promise? Can you help me understand?"

The thing is, if you're gap selling it's much harder for an objection to crop up and take you by surprise. In general, when you've done a good job of assessing the customer's current state, establishing their future state, and identifying the gap, you should be able to anticipate any major issues before the customer even thinks of them.

Every time you hear an objection, you'll want to hold it up against your customer's future state. Are they aligned? Would resolving this concern or so-called problem get them any closer to their desired outcome? If so, you'll probably need to get out. If not, you need to respond with "I'm confused." By implying that you may be the one in

error, those two words allow you to challenge people without making them feel defensive.

Let's use the theater and member seating example again. Let's say you've been moving the theater through the pipeline at a reasonable clip when all of a sudden your contact says, "You know, we thought of something. Your system allows subscribers to pick their own seats when they purchase season tickets, but it locks them into the same seats for each event. Our subscribers are accustomed to being able to choose their own seats for every show. It's really important to us that we be able to continue offering this service so we're not sure we can move forward with your software."

Because you know their current state and desired future state, you reply:

"I'm confused. You told me that you're trying to increase new ticket sales by 50,000 per year by focusing on first-time ticket buyers. And you said that you need this software to launch a major capital campaign. You currently have 1,500 subscribers. That makes up only 5% of your total ticket sales. Why would you sacrifice everything you're trying to achieve for the sake of 1,500 people who are still going to get to pick their own seats, just not repeatedly?"

When you express confusion, customers are naturally going to want to help you understand their thinking, which means they're going to wind up giving you all the information you need to figure out what to do next. Maybe they'll realize that they're getting hung up unnecessarily. Or maybe they'll inform you that you must have misunderstood what they said because they don't have 1,500 subscribers, they have 15,000. And now you're no longer confused, because that's no longer just an objection, it's a real problem, and you need to try to come up with a solution if you want to make the sale.

Never defend your product or service. Use gap selling and what you learn in the process to make the buyer defend their objection. Make them tell you why the lack of a particular feature is an issue. Make them tell you why their objection matters in the pursuit of their desired outcome or future state. If you've done gap selling right, you'll quickly discover that more often than not, the objection isn't real and the customer will get past it quickly

Price Objections

If there is one universal struggle for salespeople, it's price objections. Buyers try to play hardball, or swear they can't afford your product or service, or insist they don't have the budget and then start trying to negotiate you down. And then you're super quick to drop your pants doing whatever you can to lower the price to the buyer's desired

number for fear of losing the deal.

That stops now. The only reason you need to worry about losing a deal is if you haven't done a proper discovery. If you've asked all the right questions and are thoroughly informed about your customer's current state, intrinsic motivation, and desired outcome, you'll probably know long before your customer whether your product or service is a perfect fit. If it weren't, you would have walked a long time ago.

When price objections arise, here's what you gotta do: Change the focus of the conversation. Normally, the only price anyone talks about is the price of your product or service. But let's go over this one more time: Your customers aren't really buying products and services like software, consulting services, training, or widgets; they're buying change. They're buying the desired outcome made possible by your software, consulting services, training, or widgets. So don't let anyone determine the price of what you're selling. Ever! I'm going say this one more time, because it's that important: Don't let anyone determine the price of what your selling based on the product, service, or widget. That's *not what they are buying*! They're buying the *outcome* of your product, service, or widget. Therefore, remind them of the desired outcome and the value it has for their organization—the gap—and then make them defend it against what you're charging for the tool that can make it happen.

More often than not, this shift in perspective will make people see that whatever it is you're selling is well worth the satisfaction of achieving their goals.

There are three common price objections customers typically toss out:

1. "It's too expensive"
2. "We don't have the budget"
3. "We can't afford it"

1. "It's too expensive"

When someone tells you the price of your product or service is too high, remind them of their desired outcomes. As always, start with two little words: "I'm confused."

If a buyer who wants to reach \$50M by 2020 tells you your product isn't worth the \$80K you're asking, you could say, "I'm confused. This product will increase lead conversion rates by 30%, reduce lead generation costs by 50%, and decrease the average sale by thirty days, all of which would lead your company to reach its \$50M

goal by 2020 [the desired future state]. Why do you find this to be too expensive?”

If a buyer who wants to improve her ability to compete for high-end projects in order to increase revenue by 20% says, “We like you and what you’re doing, but \$40K is just too expensive,” how would you respond? Like this: “I’m confused. If I understood you correctly, you need this service to be able to compete for high-end projects and increase revenue by 20%, or about \$50,000 per month. How is \$40,000 too much to pay for a service that will allow you to earn \$50,000 more every month, indefinitely?”

If a guy stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire tells you, a tow truck driver, that your thousand-dollar fee is too high, you can say, “I’m confused. Didn’t you say you have half an hour to make it to the White House for a once-in-a-lifetime dinner?”

After you put the value of the desired outcome back in their lap, just shut up and listen. Literally, just shut up! Don’t say a word; just listen. Let the buyer try to explain why getting to \$50M in two years isn’t worth \$80K up front, or why increasing revenue by \$50K a month isn’t worth a one-time fee of \$40K. Make them justify why your price is too high. Here’s a hint—it will never be “just because.” Listen very carefully to their answer and then, and only then, respond.

2. “We don’t have the budget” *and*

3. “We can’t afford it”

I’m lumping these two objections together because customers so often confuse the two, and if you want to counter them, you first have to make sure you know which one your customer is really dealing with.

If an organization lacks the budget for your product or service, they actually have the money; they just didn’t allocate any of it for the type of purchase you’re proposing.

For a lot of people, however, “it’s not in the budget” is code for “we don’t have any money for this purchase at all.” That’s not a budget issue, that’s an affordability issue. You have to know for sure which one your customer means before taking another step.

If an organization literally doesn’t have money available to pay for a product or service, there’s not a whole lot a salesperson can do about it, which means it’s time to walk away from the sale. Let’s say Kate has a \$25M, seven-bedroom home in Orange County, and she tells her cousin Luke she wants to sell it to him for \$4M (no, it’s not haunted). If Luke doesn’t have \$4M, he doesn’t care and nothing Kate says is going to make the sale, not because Luke can’t see the value in purchasing a \$25M home for \$4M—he sees the value and desperately wants the house—but he literally doesn’t have access to that kind of money. It’s not that Luke didn’t budget for what Kate is selling; it’s

that he can't afford it, no matter how much he values it.

But if Luke did happen to have \$4M in various assets and could easily get to it, it would be smart to buy the house. No, he didn't budget for it, but the value is so great, he'd be crazy not to buy it even if it were just to flip it. And that's just under normal circumstances. What if Luke's biggest goal at the moment was to put his triplets through college and leave them debt-free?

If you discover that your customer has a budget issue and you know for a fact that your product or service is going to get him to his desired outcome, it's on you to help him realize that it's in his best interest to revisit that budget so he can make the purchase. That's when gap selling comes to the rescue—because it provides you with all the data you need to show why he's making a mistake. Let's say that instead of complaining that your product is too expensive, a customer informs you the \$80K price you're asking isn't in his budget and he's going to have to wait until the next fiscal year to make this purchase. You could express sympathy, but regardless, you'll lead with two familiar little words as you gently challenge his logic: "I understand, but I'm confused: If you don't move forward till next year's budget, you'll lose \$50K a month for the next six months. That's \$300K. Are you prepared to lose that kind of money, plus forgo competing for high-end projects for six more months? How much longer can you afford to let the competition win market share? How will that financial loss affect your ability to make your stated goals?"

Once you say your piece, you guessed it—shut up and listen. Make your buyer defend his decision. Get him to explain how the impact of rejiggering his budget could be higher than the impact his organization will suffer after losing \$300K and the opportunity to compete for high-end projects. I promise, he won't be able to. Notice that once again, you're not defending the value of your product or service. You're not trying to convince anyone of anything! You're merely forcing the buyer to defend his decision given the outcomes and desired future state he says he wants.

Gap Selling is Good for Everyone

Little can take you by surprise when you gap sell. Done right, it tells you everything you need to know about what's best for your customers, often before your customers can figure it out for themselves. If you have a clear understanding of your customers' current state, future state, their desired outcomes, and have properly calculated the gap, you know long before they do if your product or service has value to them and whether or not they need it. You might feel a little uncomfortable with the idea of confronting customers with their erroneous thinking, but you shouldn't.

You wouldn't let someone blindly walk out into oncoming traffic, would you? If you saw someone walking and texting so focused on his phone that he didn't notice he was heading straight into a busy intersection, you might try to get his attention with a quick, "Excuse me!" When you realized he was wearing headphones and couldn't hear you, you might yell a little louder, "Hey! Hey!" But if he kept walking and you saw that he was about to step into traffic, you'd quickly reach out and pull him back onto the sidewalk. Under normal circumstances, grabbing a stranger or even touching a stranger would be inappropriate. But in this case, you're going to do it anyway because you know you're acting in that person's best interest.

Gap selling puts the same concepts into play. It gives you the certainty, confidence, and hard data you need to point out to your buyers when they're making unwise, shortsighted, and even financially fatal decisions. Sometimes you just have to reach out and grab people by the shoulders to keep them from accidentally killing themselves. Gap selling not only gives you the power to save people from making the mistake of not buying your product, it also gives you the power to save them from trying to buy it when they shouldn't, freeing you to concentrate your efforts on the customers that really will benefit from your solutions and the opportunities you really do have a chance at closing.

When you realize that you and a customer aren't going to be a perfect match, tell him! Summarize what you've learned about his current state, remind him of what he has told you he's trying to accomplish, and explain that while you don't think you'll be able to help him, you have a recommendation for someone who will. By graciously acknowledging your offering is not a good fit, you avoid wasting everyone's time and working a deal that will never close. In fact, knowing when to walk away from a sale can be one of the most helpful things you can do for a customer and for yourself.

PART III

Gap Prospecting

You gotta give 'em a reason...

PART III . Gap Prospecting

Now that you completely understand the gap-selling methodology and how and why it works, we're going to take a step back. Like, way back, even before the discovery process. We're going to talk about prospecting. Why? Because prospecting is everything. If you can't get prospects, you have no one to sell to and most companies and salespeople *suck* at prospecting. Their emails are selfish and all about them. Their voicemails are drab and don't offer anything compelling, and their social selling is obnoxious and intrusive. Too many of us are using old school me, me, me interruptive, valueless approaches to build our pipeline, and we're failing because of it. Gap prospecting changes all that. Why? Because gap selling isn't just a methodology for moving deals through the pipeline; it's a philosophy for engaging and influencing people, and therefore, it will improve your results in any environment where you are working to influence change.

Everyone should read this part of the book (even marketers could benefit from paying attention here) but it'll be of particular interest to outbound sales development reps (SDRs) and outbound account executives—those of you who have to hunt for your supper. You'll learn how to be an expert problem finder and avoid offering up the annoying things that offer no value. You'll see how focusing and targeting customers with gap-selling techniques will generate solid B2B leads, grow your pipeline, improve your engagement rates, and grow your customer base. Who knows—by the time you're done with these pages, you might even learn to love prospecting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Prospecting: Getting the First “Yes!”

Most of what we’ve learned about good traditional prospecting is tactical: How to choose the right words for the opening sentence of your email. When to make that one additional call per day. How to target LinkedIn and Facebook groups. The secret to a great cold-calling script. Take a look at Jeb Blount’s *Fanatical Prospecting* and Mark Hunter’s *High-Profit Prospecting*, great books that offer excellent practical ways to prospect. Gap selling doesn’t replace these common and effective prospecting techniques; it adds rocket fuel to them.

When you build your prospecting methodology around gap-selling principles—by putting the customer first; by preparing to solve problems, not talk product; by coming ready to consult, not sell; by leading with value—people are simply going to be more willing to come to the table. They’ll agree to a meet for a phone call or reply to an email, not because you were so awesomely charming, but because you will have helped them see that it’s in their best interest to do so. Let me drop that again, because it’s so important: *Prospects will be more willing to meet with you because they will see it’s in their best interest to do so.* “Best interest . . .” That is our challenge—to get prospects to see that meeting with us is in their best interest. Unfortunately, most of us are not good at it.

On top of that, gap selling helps you target the right prospects, so instead of wasting your time chasing after random customers who will never give you the time of day, you approach people whom you’ve already researched and identified as likely needing your help.

Gap selling is all about unearthing the right information; you can use gap-selling principles to figure out what you’re looking for and set yourself up for success ahead of time. Think about the edge you’ll have over the competition if your prospects believe you understand their business and the challenges they face. Imagine how completing a Problem Identification Chart ahead of time could shape the assumptions you’d have about the problems they are dealing with and change the way you engage with them. I see the gears turning in your head. You’re starting to get it. It’s not about your product; it’s about being a problem finder and problem solver.

Why is Prospecting So Hard?

Two reasons. The first is that like every other working person in the twenty-first century, buyers are off-the-charts crazy busy. They’re spread out in twelve different directions and everybody wants

something from them—especially their time and attention. In one day, depending on their position within an organization, they could get ten calls asking for five minutes of their time, fifty emails asking for five minutes of their time, and a slew of Facebook and LinkedIn posts and DMs asking for—you guessed it—five minutes of their time. Do the math. Dozens if not hundreds of salespeople are asking for five minutes of buyers' time every week—and you're competing with all of them.

Getting inside the buyer's mind leads us to the second and perhaps more important reason why prospecting is such a universal challenge: Prospecting is the first yes. Whenever you ask someone to meet with you, to read your email, or to download your flyer, you're making a sale just like all the other small sales you'll make as you secure each next yes that leads to a successful close. But before you can get to those next yeses, you have to land this first one, even as you're competing against twenty other salespeople vying for the customer's attention. So, what do you do to stack the odds in your favor? You construct an offer that is more advantageous to them than any other one they hear, something that is worth their five minutes. That's why you have an advantage when you use gap-selling principles to prospect. With its emphasis on problem-solving, strategic planning, analysis, and collaboration, it allows your customers to see that you hold the keys to helping them achieve their goals and it differentiates you from your competitors who are intensely focused on pushing their products.

The rest of this section is designed to increase your chances of getting that most important first yes!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Smart Prospecting Prep

1. Build a “Healthy” Pipeline

The better you are at showing prospects you understand their current state and can anticipate their desired future state, the better you'll be at landing qualified new opportunities and driving them into your pipeline. And at the end of the day, the pipeline is everything. You can't be successful without it. Too many salespeople's pipelines are junk—over-inflated heaps of opportunity trash that salespeople hold onto in order to give management the impression that they're in a good place. But they're not. I can sniff out a crappy pipeline in minutes. A pipeline is not a pipeline at all if it's not a healthy pipeline. Think of it as your sales job's digestive tract—if you're not eating the right foods, or you are alternately gorging or starving yourself, the whole body starts to spasm and slow down or get out of whack. It's a painful condition and it will force you to spend a lot of time and energy hunting for remedies to get your system balanced again. That's energy you could be spending elsewhere if you had just kept everything in balanced working order in the first place. Selling is no different. The healthier your pipeline, the better chance you have of consistently and painlessly making quota.

What does a healthy pipeline look like? It's the ratio between your quota, your closing percentage, and the size of your pipeline. Therefore, if you have a \$1 million quota and you have a 30% closing percentage, then a healthy pipeline is roughly three million qualified opportunities. So it's not just about keeping your pipeline filled, but keeping it filled with qualified prospects. The pipeline is the pathway to quota. Gap selling not only increases the number of opportunities you're able to secure via your prospecting efforts, it also increases the quality of the opportunities, thereby conceivably improving your closing percentage. Anything you achieve in sales can be traced back to the health and size of your pipeline. You could have a great run of selling, but if you turn around and find nothing waiting for your attention because you've neglected your pipeline, you're left with no choice but to frantically chase prospects to try and fill it back up. A sickly pipeline will cause you violent ups and downs and probably leave you face-planted in a heap of misery. There's no reason for that. Use gap selling to keep your pipeline healthy, strong, and predictable so that every time you close a sale you can be confident there's another one right behind it.

2. You Have to Know Who You're Calling

You may not want to believe this, but your ideal customer will not be found in every member of the Fortune 1000. It would be a huge waste of your time to pick up the phone and start dialing numbers or to send out email blasts to someone in every single company that might even tangentially be connected to your niche or field. Bad, bad idea. Successful prospecting is organized and structured. You're not looking for people to talk to; you're looking for people with problems you can solve. Remember the Problem Identification Chart? I introduced it as an important tool to prepare for a great discovery. But actually, you can also use it sooner than that to prepare for better prospecting. You can use the PIC to build an ICP—Ideal Customer Profile.

Take a look at the problems you've listed in your PIC. As a reminder, these are all the potential problems you can solve with your product or service, the various impacts these problems could have on a business, and their root causes.

Ask yourself what types of companies would most likely struggle with each set of problems. List their industry, size, the departments that would be affected, and the responsibilities of that department. Then think about who within these departments would suffer the greatest impact from those problems. That's your ideal customer.

Now rank your customers in order from those likely experiencing the highest number of problems causing the greatest amount of pain to those struggling with the lowest number of problems and suffering the least amount of pain. Separate that list into A, B, C, and D.

Your A list is composed of the customers who are battling the highest number of problems on your list and suffering the most, too. Lots o' problems = lots o' impact.

Your B list may not be experiencing as many of those problems, but they are still having a significant impact on their businesses. Fewer problems = lots o' impact.

The C list comprises buyers who are struggling with a number of the problems you've identified, yet not suffering all that much. Lots o' problems = little impact.

D? Few problems = little impact. You don't need to pay attention to any customers that land on your D list.

As you can see, pain matters when identifying your ideal customer. Pain is everything. Pain means there's a problem. Those customers dealing with a select number of problems but suffering greatly will probably be more valuable to you than a customer experiencing all the problems on your list yet suffering very little from any of them. Go ahead and target the latter kind of customer—they need you—but prioritize the former. You're no longer scattering your energy and attention by throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks. Instead, you're taking a targeted approach and investing your

time and efforts in the customers that are most likely to be open to working with you.

3. Be a Problem Finder

You know your customers are facing problems that you can fix. As you start engaging, your goal will be to compel these buyers to grant you enough time to identify these problems and not only get them to admit that the problem does exist, but that it is having a negative impact. To get that time, you're going to have to understand your buyers' mindsets—thus, the PIC.

4. Think Like a Buyer

This letter by a real senior executive from an \$18B telecom company will give you a peek at what's going on inside your buyers' heads every time they see another salesperson request their time and attention:

Dear Salesperson,

I am the customer.

I have responsibility for IT operations for an \$18B company with 30+ million customers.

Do I bet on you? Do I take a chance?

I am responsible for \$100M Opex budget and \$100M Capex budget.

Why should I invest in your company and your product when I have many competing ways to spend company resources?

I get dozens of cold call solicitations every week. I consistently work 50–60 hours per week and my schedule is booked solid two weeks in advance.

Why should I return your call, meeting invite, email? What makes you better, faster, cheaper, safer, smarter than what I have today?

I have 300+ staff.

Do they have the wherewithal to learn, understand, implement the product and derive the value of what you are selling?

I have a dozen vendors I spend \$3M or more a year with.

Do you know who they are and why I buy from them?

I have many challenges, problems, issues.

Do you know what they are?

I have a strategy and a 3-year plan.

Do you know what it is? Do you fit it?

I have partners, vendors, and suppliers.

Which one are you aspiring to be?

A partner shares risk. My upside is your upside.

My downside is your downside. Are you willing to share in that?

A vendor consistently sells me a product or service I need at a fair price and good value and is easy to do business with.

Are you “one and done” or are you willing to be there for the long term?

A supplier gives me a commodity when I have many choices.

Why should I buy from you on a regular basis? Price? Service?

Flexibility? Do you have an “easy” button?

My company has a strategy, a place in the market, is looking to differentiate, and is striving to improve our position by increasing our lead or catching the competitor in front of us.

Do you know my business, my competitors, my company’s strategy?

I buy from those I have a relationship with, those who have proven themselves over time. I can count on them. I can vouch for them.

Can I count on you?

The thing is, it shouldn’t be too difficult to understand what your buyers are thinking and feeling. They’re probably not that dissimilar to the feelings you experience when the shoe is on the other foot, when you see unsolicited email land in your inbox, or see an “Unknown” phone number come through. What do you do with those, anyway?

Delete the email?

Ignore the voice mail?

Trash the glossy postcard?

You know you do. Think about why, though. What goes through your head when you answer the phone and a stranger starts trying to involve you in a conversation? Why do you hang up?

And then, in those rare instances when you have given a telemarketer a chance to speak, think about why you did it. What did the person on the other line say that gave you reason to believe that spending even a minute with them might be worth your time? What did you see in that email that made you not delete it, or on that postcard you didn’t throw away that made you stop and think, “Hang on . . . this might be interesting.”

I can tell you what. Somehow, the seller made you believe they had something you could use or that you needed. In other words, the seller made you see the value in listening, which gave them a shot at showing you how their product could alter your current state and get

you into a desirable future state.

As you start prospecting, keep thinking like a buyer. Don't say or send anything that wouldn't compel you to pay attention if the roles were reversed. Everything you send out, every communication, every engagement should address a problem or a set of problems with which your target customer could be struggling. The communication should be them-centric—their business, their production facility, their customer service, their sales organization, their supply chain, their whatever. Your goal is to get them to engage with you on a problem or set of problems. You have to be a problem finder. Become fanatical in that endeavor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

How to Capture Attention

Your success as a salesperson is wholly determined by your ability to get buyers to look and listen. But if you can think like your buyer and you can become a problem solver, then your prospecting is going to be a lot more fruitful. If you can't do that reliably and consistently, you're sunk. Let's make sure you don't sink, OK?

Phone, Email...Which Medium?

Think of getting your customers' attention as a sale in itself. If you're following the gap-selling approach, you understand that the first sale has to offer something of value. You have to give something irresistible to a prospect to compel them to respond to your email, social outreach, or cold call. Speaking of which, let me take a second to make one thing perfectly clear: Don't let anyone tell you that cold calling is dead, or that social selling doesn't work, or that email is useless. These distribution methods are only as useless or as valuable as the messages attached to them. So no, they're not dead. It's just that if you want them to work for you, you have to be smart about it.

Your target buyers should tell you which communication channel would be most effective. If you're selling to millennials or in the tech space, email and social media may be your best bet. If you're selling to traditional, old-school manufacturing, the phone and letters by snail mail may work best. Regardless, the key is to build a multifaceted communications stack that works best for you and your target prospects' communication style.

It's the Message, Stupid

Now that I've made it perfectly clear it's about the message, not the medium, let me help you craft the message.

The best messages are those that compel recipients to action. What's the point of writing a message if no one is going to read it, or worse, if they read it and then don't take the action you'd like? I'll tell you: There is no point. Prospecting doesn't work unless people read our messages and take action. Yet, millions of salespeople write millions of sales emails, make sales calls, and engage in social selling—and the prospect ignores them. Every day, we're crafting messages to get people's attention, and no one gives a shit.

Why?

Because the majority of cold outreach lacks the fundamental element of getting attention: intrigue. If you can't generate intrigue,

no one will pay attention to you.

Intrigue

The human brain can't possibly pay attention to every piece of information that crosses its path. It would go into information overload and we'd never get anything done. Imagine stopping and looking at every street sign on the way to work, or, observing every bird in the sky. It would be exhausting and overwhelming. We'd be paralyzed by this information overload.

To prevent this from happening, our minds have become quite brilliant at ignoring useless information while allowing us to be aware of the information that's critical to completing tasks or to our safety. They do this by spending most of their time scanning the environment and observing patterns that tell our mind we can ignore them. At the same time that our minds are observing these nifty patterns that allow us to ignore the information, they are also scanning our environment for threats in order to keep us safe. Over a lifetime, our subconscious minds embraces certain patterns as a sort of safety benchmark, leaving our conscious brains free to process any new information that comes in. The conscious brain identifies, ranks, and filters everything it sees, like information triage. And most of what it sees is the same old same old, so we either ignore it entirely or give it a brief moment of attention before forgetting it was ever there.

This brilliant mental coping mechanism is phenomenally good at allowing us to get stuff done and stay safe, but it's also our biggest nemesis when it comes to sales and prospecting. Think about it. Salespeople have been sending the same boring, self-absorbed, non-compelling messages to buyers for years. No wonder buyers have blocked them out. Their brains are registering these messages as *not important, no value, don't need any, nothing here, more of the same, moving on*. Their brains are basically giving you the hand so you can't bother them and they can be productive.

The only way to break through the blockade is to trip your buyers' brains with a new pattern. When our brains, anticipating the same old same old, see something that doesn't fit their expectations, they send out a signal that immediately turns our attention straight to that unexpected thing so we can give it a proper evaluation. *Wait, what? What's this? I didn't expect that. I'd better take a closer look.* Emanating from our anterior cingulate cortex, or ACC, that surprised, intense response we have to mistaken predictions is what scientists call an error-related negativity signal, more commonly called the "oh-shit" circuit because your mind says, "Oh, shit! What was that?"

Intrigue triggers the "oh-shit" circuit by disrupting predictable patterns in three ways:

1. Surprise

Find ways to create the unexpected. Sending your first piece of correspondence to a prospect inside a box of fresh croissants might just get you that breakfast meeting after all.

2. Create mystery

Make them say, “huh?” Create pain in the form of anticipation, which only further engagement can soothe.

“Did you know that your competitor shortened their manufacturing cycle by three days using our product?”

3. Create a knowledge gap

“Were you aware that only 54% of salespeople make quota because of poor selling environments, not because of poor sales training?”

Prove that you know something the buyer doesn't about their industry, their business, their competitor, or the products they use. Research why companies fail in an area where you can help them succeed. Look for obscure information that could positively affect them. Ask questions you know the buyer can't answer. In this way, you not only position yourself as an expert with desirable information, you create pain in the form of curiosity. To ease that pain, the buyer can't help but engage. They have to scratch that intrigue itch. Intrigue disrupts the pattern, and the mind then desperately wants to catalog the information. But it can't until it gets all of the information.

Creating intrigue through a knowledge gap demands that you educate or challenge your buyers, often both. For example, if you wanted to draft a challenging message, you might point out some observations about your buyers' current state and how they're conducting their day-to-day operations. Or you could take on industry dogma. For instance, while working with an international reliability company, I noticed that due to poor processes, poor communication tools, and disarray in other areas, many reliability managers were inadvertently creating situations that were increasing the risk of the machine and equipment failure they were hired to prevent. This is a knowledge gap. My client knew his prospects were inadvertently creating situations that increased their risk while their prospects and customers were unaware. This fantastic knowledge gap created intrigue:

“Are you aware that many reliability managers are actually creating the very failures they are tasked with preventing?”

That gets attention.

Or, you could teach customers by offering up information they didn't already know, such as new developments in their field, new trends, new technologies, or you could even offer a scoop on the competition. For example:

“Are you aware that 80% of companies that use the same systems that you do rank dead last in their industries?”

Other ways to educate buyers might be to offer:

- Insight on how the competition is solving a problem with which they are struggling
- A new federal mandate or regulation on the horizon
- A discussion about new best practices for achieving XYZ
- The ability to attack a new market, reach new customers, stop losing money, increase market share, etc.
- New market data or insights that affect their business
- An exploration of unseen or unrecognized opportunities

A Clear, Reasonable Ask

Every single thing you request of your buyer is an ask, whether it's a tour, an appointment, or thirty seconds to read your email. Now put yourself in your buyers' shoes—if you were them, would you say yes to your ask? Are your asks clear? Is the timing right? How much are you asking? Why are you asking that much? Is it appropriate in relation to what you're offering in exchange? Sure, ultimately what you really want to ask for is a signed contract, but you know you can't start that way. That would be like asking someone to marry you on sight. That's a bad idea even if you're 100% sure you want to. You know why? Because asking for more than is appropriate at the wrong time and in the wrong place scares people off. They might even want to say yes and still say no because that's what happens when people feel pressured to make up their minds before they've even processed the question. Maybe instead of admitting to love at first sight with a marriage proposal, you contain your excitement and certainty and just ask for a phone number. Before you ask the Big Ask, ask the small ones and secure the next yeses.

Another trick to getting a yes? Don't ask for a chance to talk. Ask for a chance to give value. And to do that, you need the right ask with the right offer.

An Irresistible Offer

Everybody's always thinking about their ask—what they want to get out of the buyer. The ask is easy. But if you're making any kind of an ask without offering something of equal or greater value in return, you're setting yourself up for failure. It's not about you! What do your buyers want? If you're asking for a half hour of their time, what are you offering? Do you think they want a PowerPoint presentation on the six greatest features of your product? No! They want to learn something, experience something, and engage in a conversation that may lead them to improving their world, their business, their job, their life, their whatever. Therefore, when you ask for 15 minutes of a prospect's time, the prospect is asking herself, "Is it worth it? Do I really want to spend 15 minutes listening to or engaging with this person?" If the prospect doesn't quickly believe giving you 15 minutes is worth it, she's out. The answer is NO!

Is your offer worth what you're asking? It better be.

A Net Positive for the Buyer

Whatever you offer should compel your prospect to say, "Yes. I think 15 minutes of my time (your ask) is worth a discussion about solving my inventory velocity challenges, or my sales lead conversion rates, or how I could increase ticket sales without increasing my marketing spend. Yes, 15 minutes of my time is worth that." In order for that to happen, the prospect has to quickly do the math and net out whether or not what is being asked is worth what is being offered. Is it a net positive for me? To do the math for the prospect is simple, if not perfect. Take your offer, minus the ask, and you have the value.

$\text{Offer} - \text{Ask} = \text{Value}$

This is a bit subjective, but if you apply some real honesty and empathy it's not too hard to solve.

For instance, if you're asking for 15 minutes to discuss how your prospects' current recycling program could be costing them 50% more in energy costs, that's a net positive for the buyer.

But if you're asking for 30 minutes to discuss their business and see if there are some areas where you can help them, that's a net negative. No business professional has 30 minutes to tell you about their business. What happens if they tell you but there is nothing you can do for them? They've just wasted 30 minutes they could have used elsewhere. That is *not* an offer of any value.

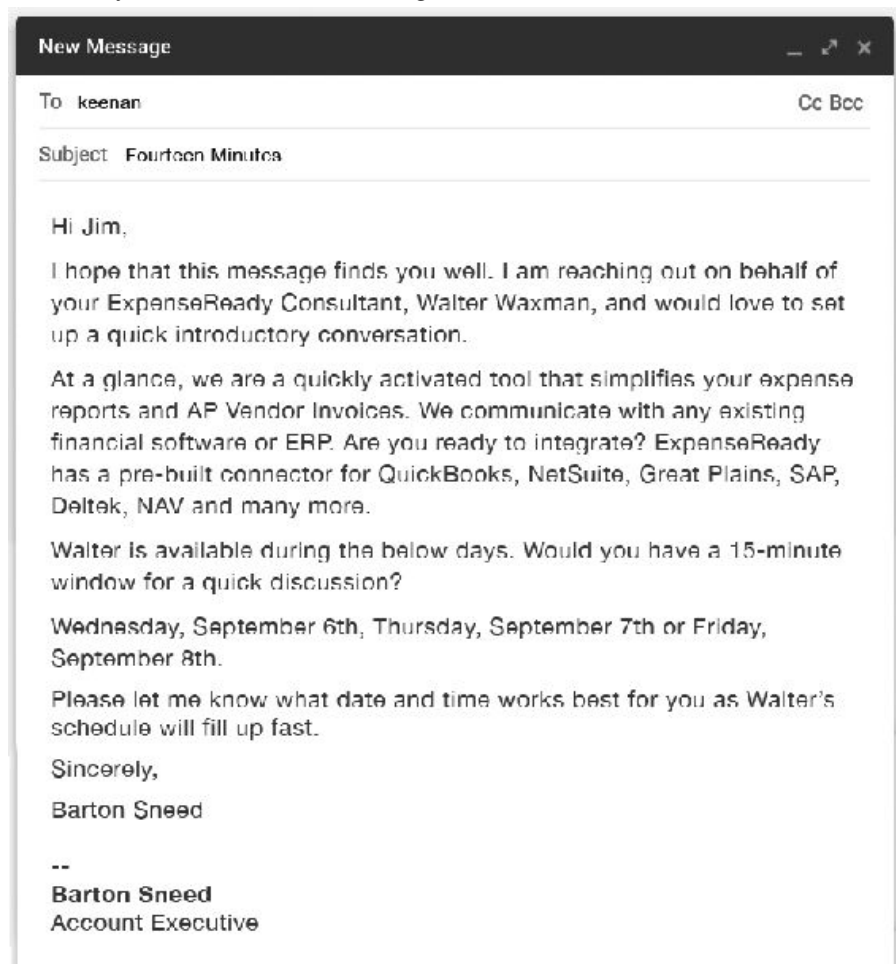
What about 45 minutes to share how your product could decrease customer churn by 35%? That sounds like a fair offer and ask, right?

Wrong.

Why? Because it puts the product first. No one wants to sit for 45 minutes listening to you talk about your product unless you can first demonstrate that they are struggling with the problem your product solves. Prospects aren't willing to risk 45 precious minutes listening to you pitch your product only to learn that it can't decrease their churn by 35% because they don't have the specific churn problem your product solves! Prospects *hate* wasting time, and if any offer you put on the table smells even slightly of wasting time, they are not going to accept. Your message will go straight to the trash bin or meet the delete button.

Practice Round

I recently received the following email:



This email is junk. Do your emails look like this? I pray they don't.

This email was about as personalized, customized, and as welcome as a parking ticket. Let's deconstruct all the ways in which this email is a major fail.

First, what is Barton's offer? It appears the offer is to introduce the buyer to ExpenseReady's expense report tool. But it's not a very good offer. Why? Because Barton doesn't give me a reason for me to look at his expense tool. What problems am I having with my expenses? As far as I know, none. Nor does Barton highlight some problems that I may not have considered. Therefore, why in the world should I have an introductory conversation with Barton? He hasn't given me a reason. Do you see one?

Second, the ask is too high for the offer. Because his offer is weak, the ask of 15 minutes is too expensive. Yes, I said too expensive, and that's a great way to look at your ask. Time is money. By equating your ask to a monetary spend, it helps assess if you're offering enough or asking too much. Most people aren't willing to spend 15 minutes of their time being *introduced* to your product. Barton needs to increase the offer or reduce the ask (the cost).

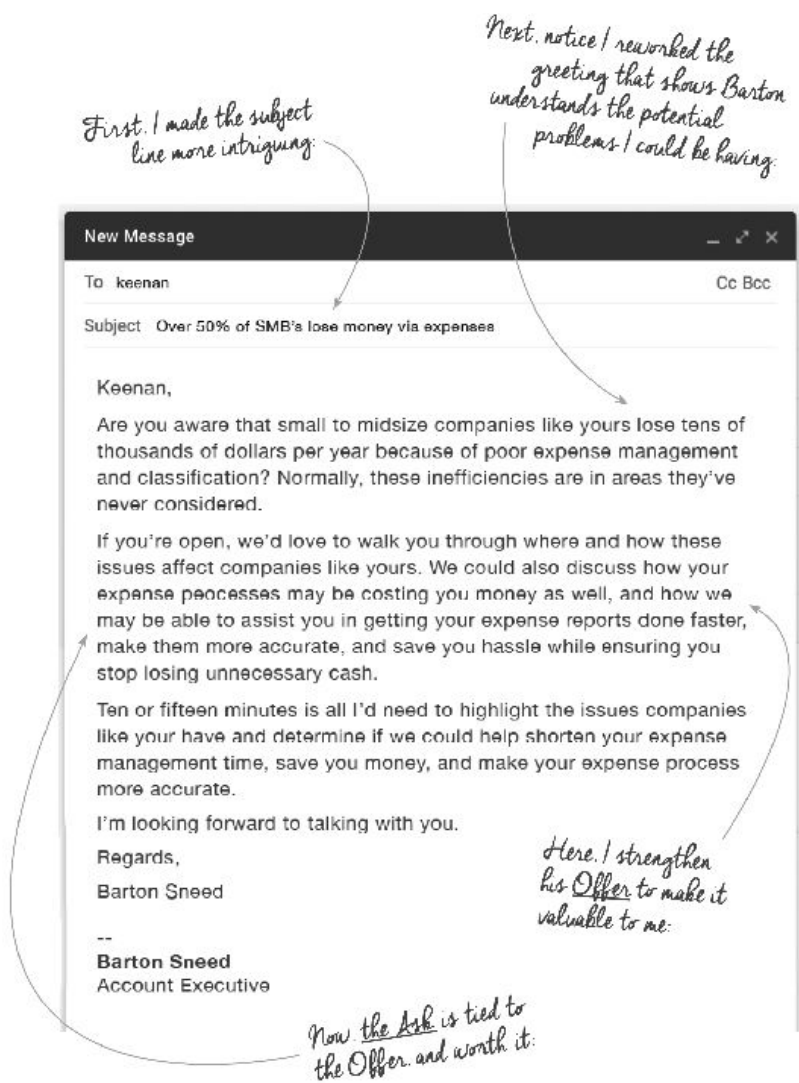
Finally, apart from the expensive ask and the cheap offer, the first four lines are all about Barton's company and product. He talks about its ease of integration and his company's integration partners, but does nothing to introduce any expense problems I may be having and the impact those problems could have on my business. I think my expense reports are pretty simple as they are, so where's the problem? I don't know what I don't know. See, Barton has done nothing to help me see that my business has a problem that must be fixed. Nowhere does Barton show any understanding of my business, the problems I might face with expense reports, or the impact those expense report problems could be having on my company. No problem, no need to change. No need to change, no need to talk to a salesperson—period. Remember, the sale is all about change.

Now, before you scoff along with me, take a good look at your own current emails and cold-call scripts. Do they begin with a greeting along the lines of: "Hi, Buyer! I am Seller McSellers with BestProductEver, and I'd like to take 15 minutes of your time to talk about our product."

What's the number one rule of gap selling?

It's *never* about you.

All right, let's look at all the super simple ways this letter could be improved...



Notice the difference in this email. First, it starts with the buyer—me—and the potential problems I could be facing and puts a number on it. It has an ask of just 15 minutes to determine if I'm losing \$10K or more through expenses. It then offers a bonus by suggesting my processes could be costing me additional time and money. That's the type of email you want to create. It reeks of value for the buyer. It's a giving email, not a taking email. And, notice the intriguing subject line. It challenges the buyer with a knowledge gap, triggering the "oh shit" circuit and demanding the buyer open and read on. How in the world could that many SMB's be losing money through expenses?

Do your emails create this level of intrigue and give this much to buyers? They should. Drafting a pitch-perfect, intriguing, challenging message takes practice. Use the Email Response Probability Scorecard

below to check your work and make sure you've included each necessary element to your correspondence. As you can see in the following graph, even when some aspects of the score are high, other elements can bring the average score down, reducing the overall effectiveness of the email. For example, if the email has a strong offer, a great ask, the proper length, but a weak subject line and isn't relevant, that can bring down the score and your email will have less impact.

See the next page for a sample Email Response Probability Scorecard that determines if you have a reasonable ask. Have you made a valuable offer? Have you generated intrigue by either challenging or educating the buyer? If you can pinpoint all of those things in your email or phone script, you have a winner.

EMAIL ELEMENTS	REQUIREMENT	SCORE
Subject Line	Subject line is compelling and summarizes the intrigue of the email body. It makes the reader curious to open. It is also 9-12 words or 40-50 characters.	10
Intrigue	The overall email message is intriguing, creating curiosity, or causes pause in the reader. It causes them to want to continue to read, to understand, to learn or satisfy a gap in understanding or knowledge. (To learn more about building emails with intrigue, check our eBook on www.asalesguy.com : <i>How to Create Sales Emails that Actually Get Opened</i> .)	8
The Offer	What you're offering the reader has value, is something your prospect will want or need. Your Offer is clear and has value for the reader. The Offer is your give and has value to the recipient; therefore they should want to take your offer.	5
The Ask	Your Ask, or what you want the reader/recipient to do, is reasonable and fair, specifically in relationship to what you are offering. The Ask is easy to execute, clear and reasonable. (Ex: 15 minutes of your time, download xyz report, introduction to the CXO, etc.)	8
Overall Value	The Overall Value is in the recipient's favor. The Overall Value is The Offer minus The Ask ($O-A=Value$) and The Offer must be worth more than The Ask. The value you offer for The Ask must benefit and provide more value for the recipient than it does you. (Ex: A free industry report with cost calculators to reduce inventory churn (The Offer), download here (The Ask), 15 minutes of the recipient's time (The Ask), to show them how your service or offer could increase inbound lead generation by 30% (The Offer).)	7
Length	The email is short, concise and easy to get through. Based on Boomerang data, 50-125 words receive the best response rates. Rate the email on how concise the message is delivered.	7
Relevance	The email must be Relevant to the recipient. Are you talking to the right person? Does the offer meet their objectives? How Relevant is the content and subject matter to the recipient and their current or anticipated issues/needs? Will they care?	9
Readability	Readability is about tone. Is the tone conversational, engaging, light, humorous, catchy, etc? The tone must not be or feel corporate, generic, general, etc. Rate on Readability and connectability. Is it easy and engaging to read and connect?	10
EMAIL EFFECTIVENESS SCORE: 8		

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Set the Right Cadence

No matter how solid your message is, how impressive the intrigue, and how valuable the offer, it's still going to be hard to break through to prospects. They're just too inundated and too practiced at ignoring anything that isn't urgent or already part of their daily pattern. If you do reach them, it's highly unlikely it will happen on the first try. Maybe not even the second. In fact, it could take anywhere from 8–12 touches for a customer to finally give you some attention. That's why one of the most critical elements in prospecting is finding the right cadence when you try to make contact. You'll have to strike a delicate balance. Get in touch too frequently and they'll feel hounded; leave them alone and they'll forget all about you even if they were intrigued.

Cadence isn't just about the timing of your correspondence, but strategically planning your message and the delivery method.

Use Every Channel

Email, phone, video, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, even FedEx—you've got access to the most powerful, wide-reaching communications stack in the history of sales. Leverage it! My research has revealed that 72% of salespeople who used social media to sell outperformed their peers and exceeded quota 23% more often than those who didn't. That doesn't mean, however, that you should dump the other channels. As I said earlier, know your buyers and create the communication stack that works best for you. We've all heard that cold-calling success rates—meaning they result in a conversation or appointment—are astronomically low, ranging anywhere from 1%–3%. But cold calling is not dead if you know how to do it right. Email is not dead if you can write a powerful, intriguing message. And no channel is dead if you have a potential customer who likes to use it. Meet prospects where they are, mix up your contact methods, get creative but avoid gimmickry, and stay problem-centric. Gap sellers know that ultimately, their success doesn't hinge on the tools they use, but on the messaging.

Shake the Message Up

The key to successful prospecting is to make sure that every communication stays focused around solving the business problems you've identified as likely to be having a significant impact on the people you're trying to reach. Each time you connect, however, you'll want to emphasize a different impact, or provide a new piece of

information, or share a relevant bit of research. Your buyer's brain thinks it knows what to expect; you're looking for ways to jolt it out of its complacency and take another look at you.

Remember:

- Every sale is made up of hundreds of smaller sales
- Every small sale must entail another yes to move nearer to a successful close
- Prospecting is your shot to get to the first yes
- Every prospecting email, call, voice mail, video, and social media post must include: intrigue, a clear and reasonable ask, an offer, and a net benefit to the customer

Bug Them Without Bugging Them

The key to a killer cadence is perfecting the timing. You want to stay in front of your client just enough to stay top of mind, without annoying them or acting like a stalker. My recommendation is to use the following schedule in business days, via a variety of communication channels.

To show how a typical gap-selling prospecting cadence might sound, let's follow along with Barton Sneed. We learned in the last chapter that Barton sells for an expense reporting company. For the sake of this example, we'll just forget his dreadful first email and pretend that the revised version is the only he sent out. It went like this:

Radio silence—Barton gets no response from me.

Two business days later he calls and leaves a voicemail saying the same thing.

Crickets.

Three business days after the last call, he writes a new email that says:

Dang, still no answer! I'm tough. LOL! (or busy).

Three to four business days after this email, Barton calls yet again and leaves a voicemail with a similar message.

A few business days later he sends a new email.

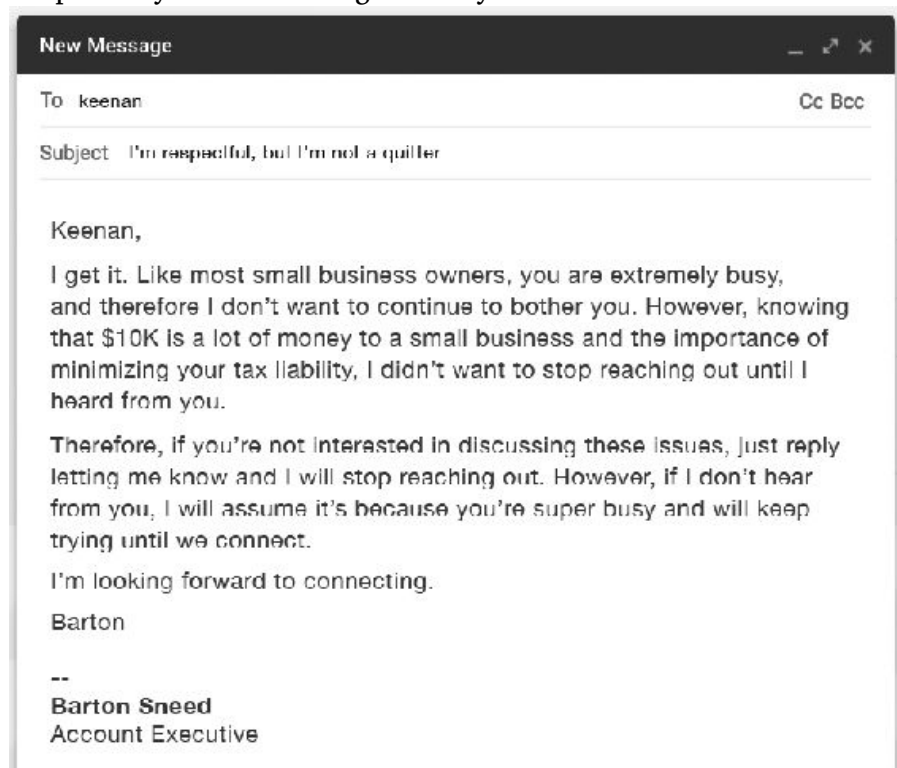
This example represents a cadence of emails and voicemails over a 10-day period, but as I said earlier, there is no single or ideal communication medium. This cadence could have just as easily included a social media outreach, including a LinkedIn connection

request and LinkedIn message. What's critical to keep in mind is that the cadence needs to leverage multiple communication mediums, provide different offers and asks, and leverage intrigue as much as possible. The goal is to stay in front of your buyer until they respond. Remember, our job is to get that first yes. Yes! I will meet with you.

Still crickets! What should Barton do?

He should wait four more business days and call again. If it's still crickets after that, wait another four days and send another email, then repeat up to 12 touches or outreaches. Each time, Barton should change up the message, provide a different offer, and address a different impact or problem. The key is to stay focused on the customer. You have to stay in their world. Don't start pitching. Be deliberate, but be patient.

HINT: If you get to outreach 9, 10, or so on and still no response, it's perfectly OK to challenge the buyer with an email like this:



Notice that we're putting the burden on the buyer to communicate. I never, ever, ever say no for a buyer. I make the buyer say no. When a buyer doesn't respond and we stop calling and emailing, that's us saying no for them and that's a huge mistake. Never say no for your buyer. I can't tell you how many times I've persisted with no response to finally break through and have the buyer say, "Thank you! I appreciate your persistence. I've been

wanting to talk to you but I just haven't been able to make it happen. So thanks for staying on top of it." Your job is to get to your buyers. Don't ever walk away until they tell you to go away. Gap selling makes it easy to do this.

Why?

Because you're challenging them on a real problem. You've offered something of substance and it wouldn't make sense to just walk away. If a company is losing \$10K a year via poor expense reporting, you're doing them a favor by continuing to reach out.

Unlike gap selling, traditional prospecting is just annoying. You're bugging them to listen to you talk about your product or have them tell you about their problems. There is no value. Gap-selling prospecting assumes that your buyers don't have time to tell you their problems so it's up to you to tell them what their problems are or at least what they might be. Maybe they can't make enough product. Maybe they don't have enough capital. Maybe they're hobbled by ineffective back-office management. When you use gap-selling principles and methodology, you already know much of that information and you're able to show off your expertise and insight. You're able to prove that you understand the problems that plague your customers, the root cause of those problems, and the impact they're wreaking on the business. You show you've done your research on how your product or service can turn those negative impacts around. If you can get them to recognize that they are suffering and that you hold the balm to their pain, they will listen.

Prospecting is about figuring out what you can do to trigger your buyer's "oh-shit" circuit so they notice you amid the solid wall of other salespeople waving frantically to get their attention. But it's not enough to catch their eye; you have to hold their attention. Gap selling ensures that you have all the information and knowledge you need to prove you understand their problems and can provide something of value in the four seconds it takes for a buyer's brain to register whether you are something truly worth paying attention to or not. When used in tandem with proven prospecting tactics, gap selling gives you what you need to build trust and credibility, thereby getting prospects to let you help them and put you in a position to bring ideas, perspective, and solutions to the table that they would never expect from a salesperson. In an environment where predictability is paramount, that's the kind of surprise that buyers love.

PART IV

Building a Gap-Selling Team

The leadership makes it stick.

PART IV . Building a Gap-Selling Team

Get ready to shift gears. You've learned the ins and outs of gap selling, you understand why it works, and you've mastered how to do it properly. Unfortunately, great salesmanship doesn't necessarily translate to great management. If you're a sales leader interested in implementing gap selling into your organization, how do you make sure your sales team understands what you're trying to do and commits to the gap? Even if you feel comfortable using gap-selling techniques, do you know how to use them to draw the best out of your team and make sure you consistently hit your numbers? Your mastery of gap selling is not just tied to how well you can execute it yourself, but also to how well you can teach others to execute it. If you are dependent on other people to help you hit your goals, then it naturally falls on you to guide and nurture those people into the best performers they can be.

While this final section of the book specifically targets sales leaders, I urge you not to check out if you aren't one yet. Aspiring gap sellers at every level will reap the benefits if they read and absorb the material in this final section of the book. First, it will prepare you for the day when you are in a position to share your knowledge with others. Second, it will show you what a healthy, thriving sales organization should look like so that when your gap-selling skills put you in high demand, you'll know what kinds of questions to ask potential employers to get them to reveal their selling philosophies, allowing you to be better prepared to evaluate whether they align with your own.

Great leaders get more out of people than they can get out of themselves. To be a great gap sales leader, you can't just throw a training methodology at your team and expect them to figure everything out on their own. It is the responsibility of sales managers to provide them with cover and support, to offer guidance, and to check the quality of their data so you can give them the best chance of delivering on their sales goals.

The best sales managers aren't just managers. They're coaches.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Manage the Pipeline

It's the end of the quarter and true to form, you're sweating. A month ago, your pipeline looked solid. Today, it's riddled with holes. That huge deal the new rep swore was coming in has stalled. Another rep seems to have lowered all of her forecasts by 20%. And what's with all the close dates getting moved out to the next quarter? Once again, you're feeling screwed, and once again, you're scrambling.

Sound familiar? Are you frequently surprised to see that your pipeline predictions wind up wildly off base at the end of a quarter? If so, you're in good company because most sales leaders often find themselves in this predicament. In a 2017 InsideSales Lab study of 151 companies over nine quarters published in the *Harvard Business Review*, they found that "salespeople close three times as many deals at the end of the month as during the rest of the month—but lose 11 times as many." You wanna know how much money that adds up to? On average, the companies in their study lost \$98 million per year in revenue because of the quarterly dip in close rates.²

Clearly if more sales organizations would adopt and master gap-selling techniques, we would see a decrease in end-of-quarter sales mania. But whose job is it to teach those organizations those techniques? The sales manager's, of course (that's you . . . or maybe future you). But building a solid gap-selling team isn't just about making sure everyone understands the concepts of current state and future state, selling to the gap, or deciphering a buyer's intrinsic motivations. Even sales leaders who have embraced gap selling could conceivably find themselves regularly struggling to meet their numbers if they don't remember gap-selling principles when managing their team. With that in mind, the best place to start exploring how to reinforce gap selling in an organization is in the spot where a sales manager can have the greatest impact on a team's performance: the pipeline review.

Pipeline Review

There is a big difference between traditional pipeline management and gap-selling pipeline management. Traditional pipeline management sounds like this:

Manager: Ok, Bob, what's the status on the Techform opportunity?

Bob: Looks good. We're waiting on the results of the demo and for

the CIO to approve the solution.

Manager: Are we going to close it?

Bob: Yes, things are coming along. I should hear about it next week.

Manager: Is there anything we can do to move things along?

Bob: Nah, we're good. I spoke with them last week and they said they'd get back to me when they were ready.

Manager: Great, keep me in the loop.

If you've been reading closely up to this point, you might already be well-versed enough in gap selling to be able to see why that conversation would be a complete waste of time. The only thing it actually reveals is that the deal is still in play. I mean, yeah, great, I guess. But did that exchange really tell us anything useful? Did we get access to any concrete information about when the deal is going to close, or what the customer is thinking, or why the seller should be so confident that the sale is going to go through? What the heck does "good" mean, anyway? In reality, Bob has admitted that he is in a holding pattern and that the entire fate of the deal now rests in the buyers' hands. Nowhere does he indicate that he has any influence in the process or that he has an ability to make sure that his buyers fulfill the few vague promises they've made, or that he has a strategy in mind that will get the buyers to the next "yes" that gets him nearer to the close.

A gap seller would never be satisfied with this kind of meaningless data. A gap-selling sales manager cannot be satisfied with it, either. For a sales leader, there is no more valuable tool than the pipeline review for assessing where your team is in relation to quota. If you don't have a foolproof way to verify that your team's pipeline is accurate, predictable, and reliable, you simply can't manage the organization. You literally can't do your job.

Trust, But Verify

In a gap-selling organization, the weekly pipeline review does not merely serve as a status update. It verifies that the numbers placed in the CRM are real, it measures and evaluates how much salespeople know about their customers and their opportunities, and it confirms that a team's salespeople have enough influence on the deal to ensure that it will close when they say it will. That last bit is crucial. If your salespeople cannot gain influence over their deals, they're not selling; they're pitching. They haven't earned the credibility that would

strengthen their influence. The two go hand in hand. You gain credibility when you gather all the information about a customer's current state, future state, gap, intrinsic motivation, and decision-making criteria. The more credibility you have, the more influence you have over your deals.

In Chapter 8 you were taught the CRM Challenge, an indispensable method of making sure you have gathered all the critical and necessary information you need to close a sale. As a coach running a pipeline review, you're basically administering the CRM Challenge to your team.

The point here is not to ferret out liars. It's more about countering the fact that most salespeople tend to be optimistic. Come on, you know it's true. It's one of our biggest strengths as salespeople, yet it can also be our Achilles' heel. That's why good sales managers have to hold their team's feet to the fire and make sure they're not just spinning hopeful candy floss stories. Conversely, sometimes you also need to make sure that members of your team aren't purposely under-promising to make themselves look good when they over-deliver. You want the pipeline to reflect what is actually happening in your organization and to prove that your salespeople really know what they think they know.

Gap-selling sales managers know they're getting accurate information when they can answer all of these questions in the affirmative:

1. Do my salespeople understand the customers' current state?
 - Do they know enough about the literal, physical business?
 - Can they list the customers' critical problems?
 - Have they accurately assessed their impact on the customers' organization?
 - Are they cognizant of the buyers' emotional state?
 - Have they pinpointed the root cause of those problems?
2. Do my salespeople understand the customers' future state?
 - Can they articulate the desired outcome?
 - Can they analyze the literal, physical impact of that outcome on the customers' organization?
3. Can they identify the gap?

- Can they explain how they calculated it?
4. Can they name the customer's intrinsic motivations for buying?
 5. Can they list the buyers' decision-making criteria?
 6. Can they provide evidence that all of this information is accurate?
 7. Do they know what will happen next and when?

If you can say yes to all of these questions every single time you run a review, you can trust that your salespeople are on top of things and well on their way to closing their deals, not just putting numbers in the CRM with a hope and a prayer.

Insist on Specific, Definitive Data

Your predictions are only as good as the data that comprise them. But how do you know you can trust the data your salespeople are giving you? How can you know if a salesperson misinterpreted a customer's emotional state, or misunderstood the desired outcomes? You can't. That's why gently pressing for evidence is so important. Salespeople will tell you what they think, what they intuit, and what they can extrapolate based on past experiences or behavior. Don't get suckered by that typical sales B.S.—salespeople are really good at telling stories! But when you're gap selling, all you want are the facts. No stories.

The facts are specific. The facts are definitive. You will have to push your team to articulate their knowledge in detail. You have to confirm that they know what they say they know. "The customer wants to grow faster" is not a fact. How much does the customer want to grow his company? By what date? How much is he growing now? You can trust details, not generalities. If a salesperson can't give you those details, the remedy is simple: Make them go back to the customer and have that conversation again. It's up to you to make salespeople define and defend the data.

Keep Things Short and Sweet

This whole gap-selling review process probably sounds more time-consuming than the average pipeline meeting, and it might be. But only at first. Once your team gets that their ass will be on the line if they can't deliver the information you're looking for, you can bet they will have the information at the next pipeline meeting. No one likes to look foolish twice. As they start seeing the benefits and begin to make

their commits, and as predictability improves, you'll be able to ease your intensity with all but the new members of the team . . . unless someone gives you a reason not to trust them, of course. It's definitely a comprehensive process, but the time and agony it will save you in the long run is priceless.

Here's a pro tip: Be skeptical of the "talker." You know, the salesperson who takes ten minutes to explain why their deal is a real deal. If your salespeople know what they're talking about, their answers will be succinct and to the point. No long-winded explanations needed, no B.S. editorials. People talk a lot more when they don't have good data. The more long-winded they are, the more they talk in circles, the more you'll know something is wrong. In general, people who don't know what they're talking about are the ones who talk the most. You'll want to listen for brevity and specificity. Salespeople are notoriously great storytellers, but in this instance, make your salespeople cut to the chase. Forget the story. Get the facts.

That said, don't let people off the hook. If you ask specific questions, demand specific answers. No answer should be so high-level that it could apply to any company in the pipeline. There are no one-size-fits-all answers in gap sales. And don't accept what people think, such as when they tell you, "I think their intrinsic motivation is to be able to expand to Europe at the end of the year." They think? Well, is it or isn't it? Did your salesperson even ask? If so, the answer should be written up in the CRM and they should be able to repeat it back verbatim. If your salesperson only thinks they know the answer to a question, it means they don't know, which means they didn't ask the question or didn't understand the answer. Either way, they don't know so they can't be selling to it.

Catching your salespeople without all the information isn't necessarily a bad thing. The best sales managers confront reality ahead of time. They want to get to the truth, even if it looks scary, because they know it gives them power. It gives them additional time and data to build more pipeline, get engaged in the deals, create new deal strategies, and get the salesperson back on track. It's so much less stressful and so much better for the organization as a whole when no one is afraid of the truth. Once you know there's a problem, you can do something about it. You can get the necessary info, get the data, and possibly close the deal.

Once your team knows what you're expecting from them, they'll rise to the occasion. In time, depending on the size of the pipeline, each opportunity should only take between two and ten minutes to run through, and the whole review could be done in about 15-30 minutes depending on the size of your team. The only time it might

take longer than that is when you're still teaching someone the ropes. You owe it to your team to be patient and help them succeed.

Hear the Difference

A gap-selling sales pipeline review would sound something like this:

Manager: *Ok, Bob, your prospect who keeps losing out to the smaller competitor. Talk to me.*

Bob: Oh, that's Techform. You know, they have a terrific product, but they didn't pay close enough attention when Rodeware came on the scene. They're losing about \$10K per month, and that's up from \$7K per month. They thought they had a lock on the market because of their customer service, but Rodeware just looks better and people seem to love it. They're losing deals over their poor user interface and an inaccurate public perception of their capabilities. As word of mouth about Rodeware spreads, Techform's customers are starting to switch. The trend is still climbing, and there is concern it could top \$20K a month by the end of the quarter. The CIO, Mark, is pretty frustrated.

Manager: *How do you know they're ready to buy?*

Bob: They can't afford to have the trend continue. Their product overall is a better solution, but Rodeware looks prettier. I showed them how we could improve their UI to compete better with Rodeware, how we could ramp up their promotion capabilities to quell the false comparisons, and a way to target specific buyers that will be hurt by buying Rodeware simply because of the UI. There is nothing else out there that can help them do as much as we can, nor as fast. We're exactly what they need to stop the bleeding and get to their financial growth goals.

Manager: *They told you that, or you think that's what's up?*

Bob: I'm quoting Mark's email word for word. He says he's talked to other providers, but we're the only ones who seem to really get what they're trying to do and who can deliver like we can.

Manager: *What's the gap?*

Bob: The founder's goal was always to get the company to \$50M, then sell and start something new. They've got \$13M to go, but if they don't address this, they'll fall behind. At the current rate, they could soon be \$15 million behind.

Manager: *You've got them down to close in June. That's for sure?*

Bob: Nothing's getting decided without the CEO, so I've been going back and forth with her assistant to find a good day and

time for me to come in. I'm pushing for next week. I've also asked Mark to be there. Once I get the CEO on board, all that's left is to agree on the implementation schedule. The key is getting the CEO to understand the impact the UI is having. She's an engineer and thinks that utility is all that matters and that looks are superficial. If we can get her to understand the importance of UI not just in looks but the user experience too, I think we'll get her. We're putting together some research from Gartner that shows the impact of user adoption and satisfaction in relation to UI and UX, and combining that with their current revenue decline. We think that should get us over the hump and to her approval. Our next yes is getting the CEO to agree UI/UX matters and that fixing it will get them back on track. I'm confident we can do that.

Manager: *Are they aware of the cost of not closing by June or earlier? Have you laid it out for them?*

Bob: My contact is aware, but I don't know if the CEO is and she is the final decision-maker. That's a good point, I need to add that to the agenda.

Manager: *Good. June is coming up fast and if the CEO still isn't convinced that the UI/UX is the problem, I don't see how you're going to make it. When you combine that with the fact that not everyone is on board, along with their lack of urgency to move and stop leaking money, you have a lot of meat left on this bone. I think it can close—the gap is compelling—but you have a lot more influencing to do. Keep an eye on this or you're going to lose it, and you shouldn't.*

Did you notice how different this review was from the last one? Notice all the different information being discussed. The conversation drew out all the same information the salesperson would get if they took the CRM Challenge themselves. If they're testing themselves regularly, your salespeople will have all the answers you need ready to go, because they'll have answered them before. Once your team understands what is expected of them and realizes that vague answers and flimsy CRM updates aren't going to fly, they'll be prepared, and you'll find that you can bang these meetings out quickly and efficiently. You'll have the added benefit of feeling confident that there are no hidden surprises waiting to bite you in the butt at the end of the quarter.

Keep in mind you aren't going to run through every opportunity in the pipeline. You want to target the key deals that will most impact your salesperson's commit, generally the biggest deals nearest to the close. The numbers you want to pay attention to are your salespeople's:

- Average close rates
- Average deal size
- Average length of sales cycle
- Average number of new deals to the pipeline

If you have a salesperson whose commit is \$60K for the quarter and in February you see about \$130K worth of business in her pipeline, and you know that her close rate is around 50% and you know that her average sales cycle is about two months, you have good reason to trust that your salesperson will meet her numbers. However, even when you have total faith in your sales team, it's only prudent to verify that the numbers and dates are grounded in reality. Once you're satisfied that this and any other critical deals are, in fact, moving forward, you can check in with other deals at the next review. But don't become complacent. Even if you don't challenge these particular deals again, keep an eye on them to make sure your salespeople are always listing an updated "next yes."

What's the Next Yes?

The next yes isn't, "I'm gonna follow up on a call." The next yes isn't, "I'm scheduling a meeting." The next yes doesn't come from your salespeople at all, but from their customers. It's a commitment from the prospect or buyer to do something that will move your salesperson closer to the sale. It could be an introduction to the CEO. It could be an email with a confidential attachment. It could be an agreement to send specs. It could be a written agreement on price. It could be a willingness to conduct an on-site meeting. It could be scheduling a time to go through a demo or offer a tour of the plant.

The next yes check doesn't stop there, though. If asked, your salespeople should not only be able to tell you their customer's next yes, but be able to explain why the customer values the next yes. Why? Because no one agrees to anything unless they see value in doing so. Remember, the next yes is a little sale that requires value, a reason to say yes. Every next yes requires that prospects give something up—usually time or effort—so if salespeople want to close, they have to be able to show their buyers that the cost of every next yes will be worth their while. During your review, all you're asking is for them to repeat back to you what their next yes is and why. Why is that important to moving the sale?

Every time you review the pipeline with your salespeople, they should have gotten their customer to deliver another yes and/or be actively working on securing the customer's next one. It's not always

easy. If your salesperson is selling software, and the buyer is on board but can't get her IT department to agree to open up the API, he's stuck. So what do you do? To help, you might ask your salesperson to explain to you the IT department's current state and why the API is an issue. If the salesperson has asked the right questions, he should know what concerns he needs to alleviate to get IT to give him access. For example, if IT is concerned about breach of data, that should tell your salesperson that he needs to explain the security precautions your company has taken, show that there is little to no security risk, and provide evidence that the bigger risk is to his peer in finance who's not buying your software and is paying hefty governmental fines for failing to report requirements on equipment they have on public lands. The fines and the potential risk of losing the right to keep working those public lands should far outweigh IT's security concerns. Providing this evidence is how your salesperson gets the next yes. It's what he should be working on to move the sale. It's the work in the selling process. It's how the deals get closed. Help your salespeople figure out what questions they need to ask—if they haven't asked already—so that they're always aware of what the next yes is, how it moves the deal forward, and what they are going to need to do to secure it.

Being aware of the next yes is a tough one. I once got seriously burned because I didn't understand the next yes. In addition to teaching people how to sell, I love teaching people how to ski (I'm a PSIA Certified Level 2 ski instructor). Now for those of you who are not skiers, when ski students book lessons at the resort they are visiting, they rarely get to choose their own ski instructors. They can't go to a ski school website and peruse a list of the mountain's instructors. Instead, they book a time slot and then meet their teachers once they arrive on the mountain. So a few years ago, I created a social platform for ski resorts that was embedded into the resort's ski schools' page. Every ski instructor for that resort would have their own page where they could put up pictures and achievements, their guests could leave comments, and they could be ranked and rated. In addition, there would be private instruction areas where students could get customized practice lessons and materials.

It was a brilliant solution. It allowed ski resorts to profile their ski instructors. It increased guest engagement. It created a lifelong lesson, as every time a guest returned to the mountain, they could see what happened last time they took a lesson and what progress they made. The mountain didn't have to build or code anything. We built the UI to seamlessly integrate into their existing site. It was a simple turnkey solution to increase the value of a ski resort's ski and ride school, the largest contributor of profit for the ski resorts. It was a killer solution.

I started out selling to the heads of every ski school in Colorado and their response was immediate and enthusiastic. This was going to be a game changer! I quickly learned, however, that even if a ski school was ready to jump in head first, there was another yes I had to get. IT was in charge of managing the website, and inevitably they wanted to know how my platform would integrate with the existing site. Every time the head of the ski schools would try to buy the platform without checking first with IT, the entire sale would stall as soon as IT got wind of the idea. They usually had a lot of questions. So now I knew I'd need IT to say yes, too, if I were going to move the sale forward. I shifted my selling approach a little. I continued to sell to schools, but this time, once I could see I was getting their buy-in, I'd preemptively suggest bringing in IT so that department could get involved from the ground up. This gesture helped me get my next yes more quickly, shortened the sales cycle, and it had the bonus effect of making the heads of the ski schools see I was prepared and had done my research into how their business worked.

Unfortunately, my start-up never made it very far because there was one final mini-yes I needed to get from one more department: Human Resources. A key detail one needs to know about the ski-school industry: 95% of ski instructors are not salaried workers which means the ski resort must pay for any and all work they do. Therefore, if a ski instructor went home and spent two hours on their profile and worked on their private ski lesson that day, they'd have to be paid. I knew this was an issue (albeit late in the game) and had come armed with suggestions for workarounds. Nevertheless, I failed to convince a single HR department that the service wouldn't encourage the instructors to work more hours than they were supposed to, which would be in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Their concern was legit. What would happen if in addition to hours worked on the mountain, every instructor spent several hours per day working on custom lessons and engaging with ski students on the site without demanding additional pay and then someone cried foul and filed a class action suit to demand back payment? It could have a material impact on the ski resorts. The legal liability would be tremendous and no one wanted to take the risk. Nothing I said or did made any difference. The ski school HR departments were never going to say yes.

Ultimately, the demise of the business was due to a problem with the product and how it worked, not with the way I was selling it. But as a whole, my story should serve as a cautionary tale. You have to plan ahead for the next yes, which means you have to know ahead of time every step it's going to take and every person you're going to need to speak with in order to move your deal to a successful close.

Overlooking even one necessary yes can cause innumerable delays and even stall you permanently.

As a side note, take a second and apply the gap-selling principles. Can you see what happened? The gap flipped. That's right, before HR become involved, the gap was tremendous! More ski school revenue, a greater ski school experience, more return skiers taking lessons. Great big gap! However, once you added a potential future state risk of law suites, fines and more for not complying with FSLA, the gap disappeared. Arguably, it was a negative gap, therefore there was no compelling reason to change. If you've been reading closely, I bet you picked that up, didn't you?

As a manager, your job is to make sure your salespeople know what the next yes must be, and have a customized deal strategy in mind to get it. If the buyer won't agree to send an NDA or make time to take the salesperson on a tour, it's going to be very difficult for the salesperson to customize a proposal. Therefore, before the salesperson can close on the buy, she has to close on the commitment for a tour. How does your salesperson intend to do it? If your salesperson doesn't have a next yes in the works or a plan for how to get one, they're effectively stalled. Do you want to make quota? Make sure your salesperson is always on to the next yes.

The Healthy Pipeline Checklist

You know you have a healthy pipeline if your salespeople can provide:

- Accurate close dates (within 30 days)
- Accurate quarterly commits within 15% on either side
- Clear next steps (the next yes)
- Clear deal strategies
 - Adequate pipeline coverage (the pipeline will allow them to meet their commit and quota)
- Evidence for all of the above

Excellent pipeline management isn't a pain in the ass; it's a sign of a sophisticated sales professional (who sleeps really well at night). You have to know that your pipeline information is accurate.

Darren Gloster, the COO of asset strategy management specialists ARMS Reliability, can testify to the positive effects of gap selling. In the first twelve months that Darren and I worked together training his sales group in the gap-selling principles and techniques, the business saw a 38% increase in bookings and the sales group increased their

conversion from 30% to 45%. That means they started winning almost one out of every two opportunities their salespeople brought through the door. The company has closed a good chunk of that 29% gap they were staring down, and at their current rate they're on target to hit their five-year goal. Darren is such a convert to gap selling, he is broadening the scope of the initial gap sales implementation. As Darren stated:

“We’ve expanded the rollout to include the consultants, as well, so it’s not just the sales guys that have an understanding. Now the sales guys and the consulting guys can speak the same language and work more collaboratively together. And when the consultants are out executing the work that we’ve won, they understand what it is that the sales guys are looking for. We’re training the engineers that are actually executing the work to talk to the customer about other opportunities and other gaps they have within their business. They’ll then report back to sales, giving the sales guy a reason to go back to the customer. So by the time we deliver this wonderful result and we do what we said we were going to do, we’re already seeing across all the other areas of the business where they might be able to improve and ready them to try and contribute extra work and extra value.”

Everyone in your organization should think of pipeline management as a trust-building exercise. For an outstanding sales leader, the goal in holding your salespeople accountable for the information that sells to the gap shouldn't be about ensuring your success, but about ensuring theirs.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Build A Commit Culture

Over and over we've highlighted how gap selling improves a salesperson's predictability. But if you want to encourage rock-solid predictability throughout your organization, you can build it right into the foundations by encouraging a commit culture. In a commit culture, salespeople are nurtured and coached, but they're also expected to take ownership of their numbers—to commit to them. And because the salespeople in a commit culture are held accountable, the whole group's pipeline forecasts are generally predictable and accurate, which is very good for the organization as a whole, and very, very good for the sales manager in particular. Because whatever the team commits individually, a sales leader gets to roll up into one big group commit.

In an organization dominated by commit culture, when sales reps tell their leaders they're doing \$500K that quarter, the leaders know they can count on that amount within 15%. A salesperson who commits to \$500,000 knows she cannot come in at \$400K, but she'd also better not come in at \$580K. That way, when sales leaders tell management they're doing \$50M, management knows they're doing \$50M give or take a little bit, and they plan accordingly. Everyone is happy, and maybe more importantly, everyone stays calm and focused. Existing within a commit culture frees everyone's brain to stop searching for CYA (that's Cover Your...um...Behind) options and instead focus on getting things done. There are no surprises in an organization steeped in commit culture. It's grounded in trust and discipline. It values accuracy and predictability over pie-in-the-sky projections and self-aggrandizement. It's an environment where one's word means everything and salespeople are rewarded for honesty, even when the truth isn't exactly what their managers would like to hear, because with honesty comes predictability.

A commit culture can only exist when you truly understand all the elements of gap selling: the current state, the future state, the gap, the intrinsic motivations, the desired outcomes, and the buyer's decision criteria. Only when you can list all of these elements of a sale can you accurately predict when a deal is going to close. Data is critical to accurately committing to a number within 15%, and the less data you have, the more difficult it is to commit.

Surprise is the enemy of a sales leader. And yet sales managers leading traditional sales teams are constantly taken by surprise; their salespeople often make predictions based on their gut. Inevitably, they low-ball their sales projections and then make it by a mile, or they set

their bar too high and miss it by a mile. Rarely, however, do they actually come in right on the nose or somewhere very close. You know why? Because their gut isn't working with data. Our gut is great for sensing opportunities, feeling out other people's moods, and fine-tuning our questioning techniques. It sucks as a predictive tool, though.

Therefore, when you start asking the individuals on your team, "What's your commit?" you're not asking your team to tell you what numbers they think they're going to make. You're asking them to tell you what the data in front of them tells them they are going to make, give or take 15%. And then, they are going to commit to that number. They don't get to come back later and change it if things start to go south. If they are gap selling properly, they will make their commit. If they are not—if they do not know their buyers' intrinsic motivations, or their decision-making processes, or they haven't correctly assessed the gap—they won't. More deals are lost, not because the customer didn't have a problem or set of problems, but because the salesperson didn't have enough information to effectively influence the deal to close. Therefore, by building a commit culture that forces your salespeople to accurately commit to a number each quarter they cannot miss by more than 15% on either side, you're forcing them to get all the information necessary, because they won't make their number if they don't.

Now, here's where developing a commit culture gets difficult. You have to let your salespeople commit to whatever number they believe is accurate. You cannot, I repeat, cannot tell them to change it or go find more opportunities. Commit is an accuracy game, not a goal game.

A quarterly commit is about providing accurate insight into what the salesperson can do that quarter with a small (+/- 15%) variance. I know this is hard for many sales managers. What if someone with a \$10K a month quota only commits \$20K for the quarter? Your instinct might be not to accept it and tell them to go find more "stuff" and come back with a better number. But a low commit to quota isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, finding out ahead of time that your salesperson will miss quota is a gift. Seriously!

Think about it: What would happen in your sales organization, as it's run now, if you found out three-quarters of the way into your quarter that you were going to miss quota by \$200K? Mayhem, right? You'd plunge into reaction mode and start figuratively flogging your team to do whatever it took to make up those numbers, from offering steep discounts to free upgrades, waiving install fees, shorter contracts, and any other "giveaway" to get the deals through the door. But in a commit culture you'll know the first day of the quarter where

you sit in relationship to quota because the team's commit will tell you. If the team's total quota is \$1.1M and they are committing only \$900K, you've just been given a gift. You know 90 days in advance that you're going to have a poor quarter, and you have 90 days you wouldn't have had to fix it. If there's going to be a \$200K hole in your quota attainment, a commit culture makes sure you know about it well ahead of time. Now, instead of having a disaster on your hands because you found out at the end of the quarter, you've got a huge opportunity to address it. You now have 90 days to find that needed \$200K. What new prospecting methodologies could you try? What support could you seek out from your marketing department? Not only would you have enough time to figure out how to solve the problem, you would also know you need to spend extra time helping the culpable salesperson(s) improve their gap-selling skills. Creating a commit culture—a culture based on data and the influencers of change that ultimately drive the sale—fosters a winning sales environment.

Challenge, Then Accept

As I said earlier, the thing about working within a strong commit culture is that in order to foster that necessary bond of trust, you will have to accept the numbers your team gives you, including the ones you'd rather not. Reality matters. So if someone tells you that they are committing to a number that is lower than their quota, you have to accept it. You don't get to pressure them to change their number. Besides, what good would it do to set your salesperson up to fail? If they're looking ahead and can see they're going to have a bad quarter, consider it a blessing that you know ahead of time so you can do what you can to remedy the problem and make up the numbers the next quarter.

Accepting your team members' prediction doesn't mean you're not allowed to gently challenge them, however. (Note that I said "gently." We're trusting and verifying, not doubting and interrogating.) Your salespeople should always be prepared to defend their answers, whether you're examining their discovery or questioning their financial goals. If someone has \$200K in the pipeline and commits \$200K and you know they have a 40% close rate, your inner alarm should go off. A 40% close rate should mean your guy is committing \$80K, not \$200K. What's going on? And then you can ask, "Can you tell me why you're over-committing?" More often than not, you'll help your salesperson see there is crucial information missing. But, if after pointing out the fact that their close rate doesn't support the commit and that one of the deals is in the early stages, and that salesperson still wants to stick to their commit, you have to let them. Let your

salespeople stick to their commit number no matter what. It's their commit, not yours. You know what happens when you force someone who has committed \$80K to go hunting for more prospects so they can meet \$200K instead? They will bring you \$80K. Being an excellent sales manager means trusting that your sales team knows their business, verifying that their data is good, and committing to support them no matter what. Giving people ownership over their commitment is critical to a strong sales organization. Management cannot own it for them or the whole team will fall apart.

Reality is Critical

The risk of a pipeline review that sounds anything like traditional pipeline meetings or the dialogue at the beginning of Chapter 18 is that you won't find out that trouble is coming until it's practically on top of you. This gives you very little time to do anything to prevent it or mitigate the fact that you now have little hope of meeting the financial expectations you set for your organization months ago. In general, using gap-selling techniques to manage the pipeline should keep you so abreast of your team's progress that such surprises will be uncommon. But sometimes deals do fall through. Salespeople get overconfident, customers get sidetracked, and contracts sit unsigned. Stuff happens. The beauty of gap selling, though, is that it works as a phenomenal alarm system. If you see a deal stall at the same "next yes" for a month, you're going to know something's up. But because you're asking all the right questions, you're not going to waste 90 days crossing your fingers while your salesperson reassures you—without evidence—that you don't need to worry because he's going to pull through.

The best sales managers confront reality ahead of time. They want to know the truth, even if it hurts. To that end, they foster a trusting culture where salespeople feel safe admitting the truth. Confronting reality as it is, not as they wish it would be, ensures them the runway they need to build more pipeline, or get engaged in a few more deals to help them along, or create new deal strategies in order to get things back on track, or make up the numbers in the following quarter. Whether you're selling or sales managing, gap selling will always be your paddle if you or your team find yourselves up the creek. The sale is always in the information.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hire the Right People

You might think that a discussion on how to hire the right people for your gap-selling organization should show up somewhere closer to the beginning of a conversation about sales management and building teams. I left it for last because I want you to completely rethink what you look for in a sales hire. Normally, your top criteria would probably be specific industry experience like SaaS or HR or manufacturing or computer hardware, or the number of years they've been selling, a positive sales track record, i.e., number of years of quota attainment or trips to the Presidents Club combined with a big personality, or an ability to build relationships or charm folks. Once you've screened for these, you might bring the best of the group in for interviews to see if they'd be a good fit for the organization. But I'm telling you, this is not the way to hire for gap selling and to build a winning sales team.

Gap selling is a very different type of sales methodology. It's not about aggressively pitching product, or mad persuasion skills, or charm. Gap sellers, therefore, are a very different type of seller. Therefore, the very last thing a gap-selling organization should look for is a typical salesperson. A potential employee's experience and accomplishments matter, of course, but only—*only*—in relation to how many of the nine gap-selling traits they embody:

- curiosity
- critical thinking
- empathy
- problem-solving
- leadership
- creativity
- deliberate learning
- coachability
- business acumen

Just because someone has amazing sales stats doesn't mean they will be amazing at gap selling. Hence, as you start building a gap-selling organization, or reshaping your current organization into one,

you'll want to look for people who exude some or all of these qualities. Obviously, it would be ideal if you can find them already working and succeeding within your industry. But the beauty of gap selling is that it transcends industry. You could train a monkey to pitch a product. You can't nurture and encourage gap-selling traits, however, if the seeds haven't already been planted.

The Nine Qualities of a Gap Seller

1. Curiosity

You know that little kid who constantly asks why the sky is blue, and why dogs have whiskers, and why that lady is crying, and why the dentist only covers your body to protect you from the radiation and not your head, and why why why why, along with "When?" and "How?" and "Who?" and "Where?" and "What kind?" and "How many?" Look for that kid in a grown-up's body.

Gap salespeople have an innate curiosity that predisposes them to ask questions all the time. Whenever they talk to a customer, their mind goes to the next question. Why does that happen? Why does it matter? In what way does it affect your organization? How does it make you feel? Most traditional salespeople just aren't that curious. They are usually too busy talking about their product to ask many questions, and when they do, they tend to lack the curiosity that would automatically help them find the real problem. They take answers at face value, which means they never even see that there is a whole stratum of information layered beneath the surface of their customers' business landscapes.

Another benefit to hiring curious people is that they generally have strong assessment capabilities, which means once they've rooted out as much information as possible, they're good at putting it together to form a picture and deciphering the story it tells. Like geologists and archeologists, gap sellers gain great satisfaction in digging deep, piecing together shreds of information, and understanding everything at its deepest level.

2. Critical Thinking

Curiosity drives the deep questions, but what good is it if you don't do anything with the information you gather? A natural gap-selling salesperson automatically takes a look at what they have learned and then gets to work figuring out what to do with that information. What conclusions can be drawn from this? What insight does it offer? Critical thinkers will know how to gently challenge their customers to make sure that they know what they think they know, that the status quo is working the way they say it is, that the future state they say

they desire will do what they believe it will, and that they fully understand the impact all of their decisions will have on their organizations. They don't ask questions to satiate a thirst for knowledge, but because they notice everything and see opportunity in interpreting, processing, and analyzing information many different ways to see all the potential outcomes.

3. Empathy

This is huge. No buyer will ever invite a salesperson to help them solve their problems if they're unable to connect emotionally. A customer has to believe that a salesperson not only understands what it's like to walk in his shoes, but that she can feel the same pinch when the shoes are a poor fit. Salespeople with a lot of empathy will naturally place the focus of a sale on the buyer. You won't ever have to remind someone with deep empathy that the sale isn't about them because they naturally go through life thinking about others, anyway. That doesn't necessarily mean they're more altruistic than anyone else, just that they have a rich imagination that often presses them to look at the world through other lenses besides their own.

4. Problem Solving

Remember, gap selling is not actually about selling; it's about fixing problems! And great gap sellers aren't merely problem solvers. We're problem finders. Like a mechanic staring under the hood of a car or a doctor studying an MRI, we're never happier than when we've diagnosed the source of a problem and are confident we have the know-how and resources to solve it. You want to invite people to your team who welcome challenges and seek out tough problems to solve.

5. Leadership

Gap sellers are so much more than salespeople. Their deep knowledge of their customers' industries and businesses, along with fresh eyes, allows them to offer the objective analyses, perspectives, and solutions of expert consultants. But as in all things, perception matters. A salesperson who does not carry himself with ease and confidence, who finds it difficult to be assertive and direct, and who doesn't inspire people to listen, trust, and follow is going to have a very difficult time guiding their customers and helping buyers feel safe and secure as they contemplate and prepare for change. Gap selling is close, collaborative work.

6. Creativity

Artists see things that other people miss in combinations that other people wouldn't think of. Like artists, creative salespeople have a

special skill for solving problems, seeing different ways to accomplish goals, address objections, mitigate risk and overcome roadblocks. When a problem is simple and straightforward, it might just require a simple and straightforward solution. The gap-selling process, however, reveals that in general, few business problems are as straightforward as most customers think. Gap selling generally delves so deep, it often unearths issues that prospects didn't even know existed. When faced with a messy multitude of problems, solutions, and possible consequences, creative salespeople see things differently; they imagine multiple possibilities, formulate various solutions, and conceive unique ways to solve tricky issues, address client concerns, outwit the competition, and position their products and services in the best interest of their buyers. While they learn from history and gather best practices as they gain experience, true gap sellers are primed to see the unique details in every sales opportunity that necessitate unique, creative solutions to match.

7. Deliberate Learning

Taking a cue from most of the world's premiere experts in business, sports, and the arts, in addition to approaching all of life as a learning opportunity, gap sellers purposefully work at improving their skills and increasing their knowledge. Rather than exclusively concentrating on their strengths, they acknowledge the gaps in their expertise or comprehension, face them head-on, and practice until they see verifiable evidence that they're getting better. Gap sellers often set personal goals and seek out mentors who can guide their research. Whether it's 10,000 hours over a career, five hours per week, or just fifteen minutes per day, gap sellers regularly take the time—no, they *make* the time—to quietly read, research, and reflect on how they can be better problem solvers and deliver faster, cheaper, more dramatic results to their customers.

Quite frankly, in an era where news, tech and innovation breakthroughs and fresh industry updates are available to us in the blink of a notification or the quick tap of a Google search, it's inexcusable for anyone to plead ignorance about . . . gosh, anything. Most of what you could possibly want or need to know is all right there available for free on the interwebs if you want it and have the patience to dig around for it. Seek out those people who take joy in learning and who are unintimidated by the constant flood of new knowledge spilling out every day in this Information Age. Those will be your strongest performers.

8. Coachability

The willingness to be coached usually goes hand in hand with

curiosity and an interest in deliberate learning. In a nutshell, smart people don't turn down the opportunity to learn more and get better. Even the most prodigiously gifted musicians and athletes work with teachers and coaches. No one is so good that they can't learn something new.

Make it a point to avoid hiring know-it-alls on your team. They're unbearable anyway, and more than likely suffering from the Dunning-Kruger effect. The more ignorant and incompetent people are, the more confidence they have in their knowledge and abilities. Worse, they're so ignorant, they don't even realize they're ignorant. Anyone that convinced of their prowess will likely resist suggestions and feedback, which will preclude them from ever improving beyond their current state. Gap sellers, on the other hand, are confident in their abilities, but also self-aware and open to feedback from others.

You're not looking for people you can mold into your own image or turn into robots. Let's keep it real, robots would be terrible at gap selling! It's way too complex and requires too much insight into the human condition. You're looking for people who respond well to suggestions, who are willing to be critiqued, who are OK with constructive criticism, and who seek out suggestions from others. Coachable people are not only open to growing, but are also open to feedback and evaluation. They don't see criticism from their boss as a negative, but as a gift and an opportunity to improve. Not everyone is coachable, but those who are make excellent salespeople. Hire them.

9. Business Acumen

I purposely left this one for last. Obviously, unless you want to do a lot of hand-holding, you want to hire people with a solid understanding of how businesses are run. When you're running a business and selling to other businesses, you want business-oriented, business-savvy people working for you. But unlike all the other traits above which are primarily linked to emotional intelligence (EQ), business acumen is relatively easy to seek out and learn, either through school or through life and work experience. A salesperson can learn accounting skills, the basics of capital investment, inventory management, and the principles of good marketing in class or on the job. You'll want someone with a baseline modicum of interest and knowledge of business in general, and particularly, though not necessarily, in the niche you inhabit. More important, however, is finding someone eager to learn everything they can about your niche and that of their customers. In this kind of selling environment, you want to base most of your hiring decisions not on what people have already accomplished, but on their potential to execute gap selling.

In sum, when building and growing your sales team, a candidate's

networks and number of years working in the business should take second place to their skills. Do they have the right temperament to be a good gap seller? Do they have huge amounts of patience, grit, and curiosity? How much time do they spend reading and staying on top of industry news and innovations? Do they exude a sense of credibility and trustworthiness? Do they get frustrated easily, or do they relish a good challenge? Are they interested in selling or in problem-solving? Do they genuinely care about helping their clients or making quota? Are they eager to learn? Do they seem to be leaders or do they isolate others? Are they the type of person who seems to know something about everything, a reliable source for unique information and perspective even on some of the most obscure topics? The candidates who exhibit these personality traits are the people who can gap sell. These are far better indicators of how successful a new hire will be in a gap-selling organization than the number of years of experience a salesperson has or the extent of their business contacts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It's Not About You

Ultimately, to become a superstar gap sales leader you have to make sure that your focus is turned in the right direction. That is, outward. Just as gap selling isn't about the salesperson but about the customer, being a sales leader isn't about getting what you need out of your sales team but about providing what your sales team needs to get out of you. They need your guidance, your feedback, your direction and your inspiration. If you start thinking of yourself more as a coach than a manager, you'll put yourself in the right mindset to build and grow a winning gap-selling team. Coaches teach, train, and motivate, and they can even be hard-asses, but you know what else they do? On game day, they get out of the way. Trust has to go both ways.

In a sense, that coaching metaphor can be applied across the board. Just as you provide advice to your team, your team's primary function is to provide advice to its customers. Their job shouldn't revolve around pitching their own products and services, but on gathering enough information to be able to educate the customer, provide an in-depth analysis of their business' current state, and suggest strategies that could be put in place to move them to their desired future state. Business is tough, and people work hard. It goes a long, long way when they feel like they're in the expert hands of someone who cares as deeply about their business goals as they do. The thing is, your salespeople can't commit their focus to those goals if you're fostering a sense of fear and panic, or encouraging them to force a close to make quota, or making them feel like they have to cut corners to get the deal done. That's a traditional selling culture, and that sucks.

Encouraging a coaching culture instead of a selling culture falls on you. Therefore, make it a point to support your team's ability to sell to the gap every day. Reinforce that objective in every pipeline meeting and every interaction. Equip your team with all the support they need to be world-class change facilitators and indispensable assets to their customers. In a study released in their book *The Challenger Sale*, Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson of CEB (now Gartner) revealed that 53% of customer loyalty was not a product of customer service, as might be expected, but of the sales experience.^{xv} You hear that? More than half of a customer's loyalty is due to the work your team is doing before the prospect even buys your service or product! They're not hooked by the company or brand, nor the product and service delivery, nor the value-to-price ratio. They're hooked by the sales experience. And there is nothing more effective for maximizing that

sales experience than gap selling.

Successfully implementing gap selling starts and stops with leadership. It's your ability to reinforce the gap-selling principles via pipeline meetings, coaching sessions, the hiring process, and in annual reviews that will make your organization operate smoothly. Too often, sales organizations provide sales training but don't provide the follow-up support. Then they're confused about why the training didn't work. Gap selling is far more complex than traditional sales methods. It makes more rigorous demands on salespeople and requires too many subjective judgment calls for new gap sellers to be successful without sales management reinforcement. Without guidance and support, gap-selling techniques won't be fully absorbed or even worse, applied to your organization's procedures and collective mindset, and it won't work for your team.

The key to building a gap-selling organization is educating the team, hiring the right people and managing the team to the gap, to the current state, and to the future state. It's ensuring the team goes deep and gets a clear picture of where the customer is, what problems they're struggling with, why those problems are hurting them, why the problems exist, what the impact to the organization is because the problems exist, and finally, where the customer wants to go. As you challenge your team, you will quickly learn implementing it successfully requires repetition and reinforcement. As the sales manager or sales leader, it's your job to make it stick.

CONCLUSION

The day before I finished this book, I had a discovery call with a CEO that reaffirmed the enlightening, empowering potential of gap selling. It was my second meeting with this company. I had already spoken with the company's head of sales and she recommended that the CEO speak with me. He was willing although he didn't really understand why the call was necessary. Typical of most CEOs, he had already identified the challenges within his organization and implemented strategies to address them. He was confident that what he was already doing was working pretty well, and to be honest, as I listened to him list the results, I couldn't disagree. On the surface, it sounded like he had everything under control. But I kept the conversation going, digging in and asking as many questions as I could about the business, keeping in mind that he couldn't know what he didn't know. Something was compelling this man to continue talking to me even though he thought he had everything covered. Something still wasn't quite right. What was it?

Then I asked some questions about his growth strategies and demand generation. He said he had some ideas for that, and you know, they sounded like they would actually work. But as I kept pushing, all of a sudden it became clear that he didn't believe in his team's ability to sell his product efficiently and effectively. It happened when I started asking about the pipeline. How long does it take to close a deal? How long does a sales cycle take? Do deals go dark faster than you'd like? And as we started digging into the actual deals, it became apparent that his team was struggling with owning, managing, and successfully controlling the sale. They were constantly being surprised when deals dropped out. I kept going, asking about the size of the pipeline. It was only 50% of the goal. So even if he closed everything in the pipeline, he still wouldn't meet the goal. And that wasn't going to happen anyway—their close rate was less than 50%.

The more the CEO talked, the more it became clear to both of us that he not only had a lead generation problem, he had a selling problem. The team was too product-focused to sell the value effectively. They needed to do a better job of convincing the prospects that the problems they faced were real and that they mattered. And that meant the sales training he was using just wasn't doing the job. After a few more rounds of Q&A, I was able to pinpoint the reason—his training focused on only part of his problem, offering only half a solution.

It was kind of magical. Within fifteen minutes, this man went from

“We don’t have a problem,” to “Holy crap, we have a problem and my solution isn’t working!” That’s when I explained how gap selling works, and how it would solve the entirety of his problem, not only changing the conversations his team was having with prospects, but the entire culture of his organization. He was sold.

This isn’t the first time this has happened. Not long ago, I had another call where someone told me he loved what my company had to offer and wanted to work with us, but that he would have to wait until next year because of budget constraints. Undeterred, I asked him a few more questions and it didn’t take long for him to realize that the cost of waiting until next year was far greater than if he found the budget to hire me now. That is the power of gap selling. When I was younger, I would have lost both of these deals because I wouldn’t have known how to guide the sale over what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. But by staying focused on the current state and having the patience to *stay* in the current state until I helped the customers land on their real problems, I was able to guide them to their desired future state, assess the gap, and lay a custom-made solution at their feet. It’s exciting for you and the customer because you’ve done the work together, and once you see the problem for what it really is, you can see the path to the future state—that happy place where the problem no longer exists

You know that feeling when you twist the final Rubik’s Cube face into place, or get to the next level of a video game? That’s what it feels like when you gap sell your way to closing a deal. It’s a feeling of pure elation and satisfaction. It’s not, *I sold a product. It’s YES! I can help! We can fix this!* You’re like the freaking Black Panther or Spiderman coming to save the day. And when you gap sell, you get to feel like this over and over, which in and of itself creates a lot more opportunities.

The selling game is hard, no doubt about it, but it’s doubly hard when you don’t know the rules. Now you do. Now you know that sales isn’t about selling stuff, but about facilitating change. You have the right tools and mindset to gain an insanely deep understanding of your customers’ problems, of what’s causing them, and of what impact they’re having on your customers’ current state. Now you know how to maximize your value, how to gain insight into your buyers’ world, how to assess the gap between their current state and future state, how to build credibility, how to influence the sale with your expertise, how to overcome objections and customer fears, and how to develop a sales partnership between yourself and your buyer built on mutual respect. Now you know what to do *and* why you’re doing it. You know the game.

No salesperson should remain stuck in a current state of useless

pitches and boring meetings or watch hard-earned opportunities disappear overnight, never to resurface again. No sales leader should watch their team scramble frantically to close deals by the end of the quarter. That kind of selling and sales life just sucks. Gap selling makes things better. Imagine a future state where you're an influencer, not a clown, where the pipeline is full and predictable, and where you feel confident and in control of every sale. That future state is all yours when you learn to gap sell. This methodology gives you access to everything you need to know to play the game of sales well, and to win at every level.

TRAINING

A Sales Guy offers gap-selling training for B2B organizations of all sizes. To learn more or to book a gap-selling training, visit us at: gapsellingtraining.com.



praise for gap selling

"Hands down one of the most insightful sales books I've had the pleasure of reading. Welcome to modern day sales!"

– Chris Nadeau, Sales Executive at Presence of IT

"If my memory was erased and I had to start over in sales and I could only use one tool to train myself—it would be this book."

– Casper Fopp, Chief Revenue Officer at Wondersign

"From actionable tips and tactics to hiring gap sellers to managing gap selling teams, this book has everything you need to know about selling to the gap. Most salespeople would be better off reading this book 20 times than 20 sales books one time. More than that, this is a book for more than just salespeople. It's a book that can benefit marketers, customer success teams, and business leaders—it's a better way of doing business. Indeed, it's a book that I will read many more times over the course of my career."

– Caleb Malik, Sales Executive at SmartBug Media

"Gap Selling isn't Gold... It's Pure Rhodium!"

The first thing I did when I finished Gap Selling was Google 'what is the most expensive metal?'. I found out that rhodium is the most expensive of all precious metals, currently trading at \$2,725 an ounce.

To give you a better idea of its cost, that's more than twice as expensive as gold and 154 times more than silver. To this day, when someone believes something is exceptional they say, 'It's pure gold'. Well in the case of Gap Selling, they would be about 2X off of their evaluation.

In my career, I've invested money in books, courses, conferences, and coaches. I now know that investing is a code word for 'wasted' because Gap Selling is top to bottom, front to back, 360 degrees the only book you need to read if you are in sales."

– Ned Arik, Business Development Consultant at VertiMax

"What 'Rework' did to how we think of work, Gap Selling is doing to sales. So perfectly fitting to borrow what Seth Godin said about 'Rework' to describe Gap Selling: 'IGNORE THIS BOOK AT YOUR OWN PERIL.'"

– Aarathy Kulathunkal, Founder & CEO of Being Cloud, Ltd.

"Gap Selling has opened my eyes and helped me view sales, prospecting, and closing in a totally new way! It's blunt, straightforward, and exactly what young sales guys like me need to navigate through the fluff of our current overwhelming digital world of sales content."

– Ammon McKinlay, Business Development Manager at Bitwise Industries

"Gap Selling is the breath of fresh air we as Salespeople know we need. We often feel the way we were taught to do things just doesn't apply anymore, but this confirms it. Keenan brilliantly breaks down the rules of the game we play, along with the practical steps to play it at the highest level. A culmination of deep knowledge across many methodologies, Gap Selling is an evolutionary bullseye of sales education. Like the Shark, Keenan's adapted a sales methodology perfectly suited for its environment. Problems, outcomes, current, and future states, change, emotions, why, why, and why again. Deals are won in discovery and 'no one gives a shit about you', so listen more, say less, define that gap and get that yes! Loved it."

– Greg Howard, Account Executive at Strongpoint

"I thoroughly enjoyed Keenan's book, Gap Selling, which put into print concepts that I have been exploring with our sales team. I have been trying to change our 'show up and throw up' culture to one which identified value and communicated it to our customers. Keenan's gap selling techniques took this one step further with concrete examples and a path to action.

Changing corporate culture is tough enough, but without a definitive roadmap, it is an impossible challenge. Keenan spends time discussing the thought process behind finding out where your customer's gap is (whether they recognize it or not) and then shows us the way to do something with that information. With great techniques from prospecting to customer interaction to managing the pipeline, there isn't one area of the sale that isn't covered.

Definitely a text that will stay on my desk for reference going forward."

– Chris Abeles, Director of Business Development at Aspen Aerogels

"Keenan's book, Gap Selling, rocked me in its simplicity and power. It will show you the core of sales—helping a prospect figure out the impact of their current state (CS) and the impact of their future state (FS). Keenan teaches how to diagnose that gap and leverage it to qualify/disqualify prospects, overcome objections, validate their decision criteria, hone in on what to show in your demo, etc. In fact, I am confident after reading this book, you too will believe that understanding how to diagnose the gap and leverage it in every part of your sales cycle is the only way to become a top performing sales rep."

– Zachary Bromberg, Vice President at MB Financial

"Cover to cover, Gap Selling is a pure joy to read. It is more than a process or philosophy, Gap Selling is a way of life. It applies to every kind of selling situation at every stage in your career. When you are ready to evolve and make a difference, this is a must read!"

Buckle your belt, buttercup, Gap Selling is going to blow your mind!"

– Eric Dutton, Business Development Consultant at Coffey Communications

"This is a no-nonsense approach to selling. Get ready to develop your skills of diagnosing your client's problems, digging deeper to know more about your clients, and making the art of selling change your new superpower. This book should be in the arsenal of anyone in business and in sales."

– Tracy Kreiter, Director of Sales at Turf Valley Resort

"Gap Selling is written with such passion, one can hardly read a page without feeling the vigor of Keenan's powerful and brave arguments. It is informative, engaging and above all desperately needed for salespeople. The

breadth of references provided in the book gives you an instant clarity of thought. Some of the things Keenan laid out are really hard to disagree with, some of them made me go crazy as they challenged my fundamentals as a salesperson. It is the kind of book that you re-read just because you do not want to miss anything."

– Ameya Kapre, Head of Direct Sales at tNex

"Keenan's informal style shines through in his book *Gap Selling*. The game of sales can be challenging. Keenan debunks ancient myths that salespeople have believed for eons. Not only does Keenan explain in great detail how to win at the game of sales he also gives the reader stories and scenarios that are relatable. I recommend *Gap Selling* to new and seasoned salespeople. This book unfolds the sales game and gives the reader the knowledge for their future state of success. Just like any game, you have to play in order to win. With *Gap Selling* knowledge your odds of winning are expediently increased."

– Melissa Morrisette, Owner & Designer of Morrisette Design

"*Gap Selling* speaks loud and direct, I was midway through the book last week when an opportunity came to put into action what I had learned. In short, I was able to protect a placement fee that went well over budget because I was able to express how my chosen candidate would take them from their current state towards their desired state. By having all the revenue numbers given to me from my discovery, the CEO quickly agreed that the fee was warranted. *Gap Selling* is an enjoyable and easy to relate to read, regardless of industry."

– Kris Johnson, Founder of Epoch Recruiters

"3 Cheers for *Gap Selling*—*Gap Selling* is an instant essential for the modern sales professional. Countless tips, new perspectives, and words of wisdom from extensive experience litter the pages of *Gap Selling* by Keenan."

– James Buckley, Enterprise Business Development Manager at Cirrus Insight

"This book sets the Sales People apart from the Sales Professionals!"

– Kevin Sullivan, Sales Manager at Universal Field Supplies

Also by Keenan:

*Not Taught: What it Takes to be
Successful in the 21st Century that
Nobody's Teaching You*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keenan is [A Sales Guy Inc's](#) CEO/President and Chief Antagonist. He's been selling something to someone for his entire life. He's been teaching and coaching almost as long. With over 20 years of sales experience, which he'll tell you he doesn't give a shit about, Keenan has been influencing, learning from and shaping the world of sales for a long time. Finder of the elephant in the room, Keenan calls it as he sees it and lets nothing or no one go unnoticed.

Keenan's passion for problem solving reaches well beyond the sales and business world. He is the celebrated author of *[Not Taught: What It Takes to be Successful in the 21st Century That Nobody's Teaching You](#)*. The 21st century has ushered in the information age, and with it a new set of rules for success. *Not Taught* shares how the rules of the industrial age no longer work and that if you want to be successful, you must learn the new rules for success.

Father of 3 amazing girls, PSIA Certified Level 2 ski instructor (see, more coaching) and avid Boston sports fan, Keenan keeps crazy busy when he's not focused on A Sales Guy.

ABOUT A SALES GUY

A Sales Guy is the leading 21st century sales management consulting company. The world of sales has changed drastically and it's not slowing down. A Sales Guy understands these changes and is leading the way in helping companies leverage 21st Century methodologies, tools and approaches to accelerate revenue and reach revenue goals. A Sales Guy is an energetic, driven, innovative, intelligent management-consulting firm. A Sales Guy isn't your grandfather's sales organization. For more information on *Gap Selling* or other A Sales Guys Services, visit us at asalesguy.com.

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***To my three daughters, Kenna, Elle, and Ava, because you rock.
I will always dedicate my books to you.
You are the most amazing young women ever.
Watch out world, they're comin' for ya.***

Shout Outs

Stephanie Land, you're a saint, and your work is unparalleled. You lived in my head for six months and came out unscathed; you are a true superhero. Thank you for pushing me, challenging me, and making sure I got it right.

[#keenanpeeps](#), none of this happens without you. I can't thank you guys enough. You guys motivate me. [#keenanpeeps](#) is unequivocally the greatest sales community on the web today. You guys are true badasses.

To every buyer, prospect, and customer who said no, yes, or maybe. To every sales leader, sales person or direct report I've ever had, to every sales organization, and sales environment I've ever been a part of, thank you! You all have a part in this, as every experience has framed, sculpted and developed gap selling.

Thank you!

NOTES

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That's it.
Peace. I'm out.